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REINDEER TREK
by Allen Roy Evans

JACK LONDON

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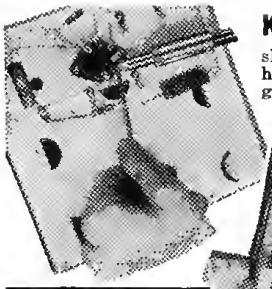

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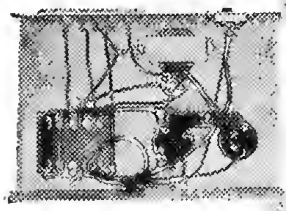

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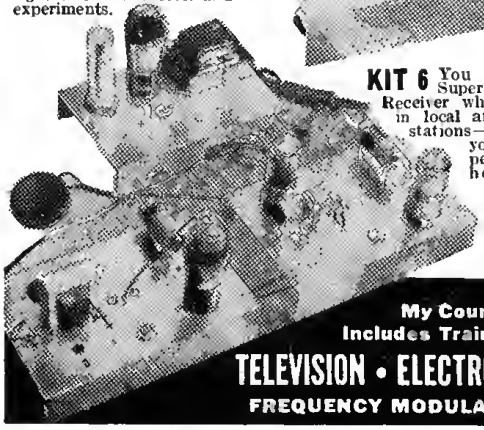

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Vol. XVI, No. 5 SUMMER ISSUE, 1948 20c per copy

A JACK LONDON CLASSIC

AN ODYSSEY OF THE NORTH . . Jack London 4

The Northland is a strange land and boasts strange tales. But the weirdest of all is the story of Unga, the raven-haired beauty, and the giant seaman, and Naass, chief of Akatan, who carried upon him a debt that would not let him rest.

TWO THUNDERING NORTHLAND NOVELETS

THE ARCTIC SPAWNS A MUTINOUS BREED . Tom O'Neil 70

The wind howls and the wild sea rages, and mutiny simmers below-decks when north country law boards a wildcat whaler to match muscle and guile against a treacherous sea tyrant.

WAIF OF THE WILDERNESS PACK . . . . Dan Cushman 90

Cunning as the lynx-cat, fierce as the wolverine, she stalked the land of the wild exile . . . alluring, savage, beauteous bait for the staunch Red Coat breed who sought the mystery of Man-Trap Valley.

TWO THRILLING WILDERNESS SHORT STORIES

BLIND MAN'S TRAIL . . . . . Michael Oblinger 21

***Hannegan's lopstick. Hannegan's lopstick.* . . . Find it and we're rich, hummed the prospectors. Miss it and we're doomed.**

MUSH FAST OR DIE . . . . . J. G. Wilson 59

Never trust a stranger when a gold cache is the jackpot-booty.

TWO BIG SPECIAL FEATURES

THE BALLAD OF THE BLACK FOX SKIN . Robert Service 31

"Trust the fangs of the mother-wolf, and the claws of the lead-ripped bear; But, Oh, of the wiles and the gold-toothed smiles of a dance-hall wench beware."

REINDEER TREK . . . . . Allen Roy Evans 34

A true tale of rich adventure and high courage; of the indomitable will of the Eskimos and Lapps who herded 3,000 reindeer across 2,000 miles of the world's bleakest, most peril-laden land. A saga of the north that may never be equalled.

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Letter from a Sourdough

I LEFT Eldorado Creek July, 1898, and hit the trail that led to Dawson fifteen miles distant.

Arriving in Dawson, after a frugal meal of moose steak, evaporated potatoes and coffee, I mushed along Dawson's main street, which spread out irregularly over the whole marshy level to where the famed Klondike River loses its clear, pellucid waters in the milky stream of the Yukon River. At 10 p.m. the sun was shining brightly, and the streets were animated as at midday. Thousands of men and many women wandered aimlessly up and down the narrow thoroughfare or drifted into the saloons. Of these there were at least a dozen larger than the rest, with wide open portals, containing hundreds of people.

Everyone was pushing and jostling around the faro table and roulette, blackjack and poker tables, some to play and some to see. A man sat in front of a huge pair of gold scales, and was very busy in weighing, from the sacks of gold dust handed him by the gamblers, quantities of gold dust in value from 50 to 1,000 dollars, for which he gave them ivory chips to bet with. Far back in the darkened rear were two or three violin players, to whose violent music danced, or rather leaped, a number of men and women. These latter were all young, attractive, and with but few signs of dissipation. This would come later, for they were mostly young women who had drifted down with the multitude to Dawson, and found no other way of existence. It was costly for women to live in Dawson those days.

Unless a woman had means or relations, the only resources in the Klondike was the dancing halls, for no decent employment could be found in the shops except for a very few, and at this period, '98-99, the trails to the gold mines from Dawson were so execrable that only hardy, robust men could travel and carry sufficient food for even a few days. Morality is under some conditions of life a question merely of necessity and self-protection. Men who never before knew faro or roulette, craps or blackjack were betting largely and recklessly after a few days in Dawson, before, in fact, they had penetrated to the gold mines or made any serious inquiries. The long trip to Dawson from their home states seemed to have sapped their principles, and the whole environment of the Klondike was that of another and worse world. It was all a game of chance, and perhaps the gambling tables would be as propitious as the gold mines on the creeks.

A restless, seething throng poured in and out of the saloons and mushed up and down the dusty street, while the rays of the late-setting sun glanced bright and brilliant against the white snow crowning the rock slopes of the distant eastern mountains. Yet there was little drunkenness, and less boisterousness. Three-fourths of the multitude were Americans, and the stars and stripes hung placidly caressing the short masts of nearly all the boats along the eastern shore of the Yukon River. But I learned then, as later, that while the Canadian laws were no better than, nor indeed very much different from, our American laws, their execution was more stringent and energetic. Legal offences were punished, and not only punished, but punished promptly, which is the main thing.

It was not so easy to prosper in this weird city of the Arctic, and failure meant more than in the lower latitudes. The dread severity of the coming winter was ever present to the mind, and the high prices of food and supplies forbade consolation to him that had a slender purse. Besides, the reports were not cheerful. There seemed to be too many men and too few gold mines.

I reflected that I had some money with me, that although a mere youth, that I had some mining experiences, and therefore had some advantages, and that, at the worst, I could take care of myself. I retraced my steps up to Claim No. 4 on Eldorado Creek, where I remained to see this gold mine produce half a million dollars in gold dust for my brother-in-law. As I mushed along the trail, the midnight sunset was resplendent in its glories athwart the western horizon. When I arrived on the creek everyone was working—no one idle. Men were building log cabins. I was here, and here I would remain. If there was gold, I believed I would get my share, and I did.

JAMES R. LITTLE.

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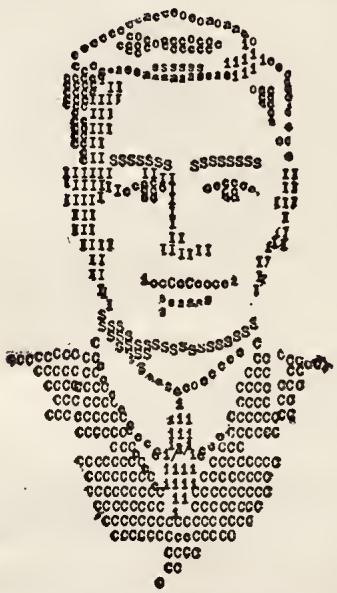

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"The spirit of the bottles had made me weak like a newborn child. My legs would no more stand under me. Then he took Unga in his great arms and carried her off, and his laugh was like the sound of the big bull seal."

An Odyssey Of The North

By JACK LONDON

The Northland is a strange land, and boasts strange tales. But the weirdest of all is the stirring story of Unga, the raven-haired queen, and the giant who followed the seas, and Naass, Chief of Akatan, who carried upon him a stark debt that would not let him rest.

THE SLEDS were singing their eternal lament to the creaking of the harnesses and the tinkling bells of the leaders; but the men and dogs were tired and made no sound. The trail was heavy with new-fallen snow, and they had come far, and the runners, burdened with flintlike quarters of frozen moose, clung tenaciously to the unpacked surface and held back with a stubborness almost human. Darkness was coming on, but there was no camp to pitch that night. The snow fell gently through the pulseless air, not in flakes, but in tiny frost crystals of delicate design. It was very warm—barely ten below zero—and the men did not mind. Meyers and Bettles had raised their ear flaps, while Malemute Kid had even taken off his mittens.

The dogs had been fagged out early in the afternoon, but they now began to show new vigor. Among the more astute there was a certain restlessness—an impatience at the restraint of the traces, an indecisive quickness of movement, a sniffing of snouts and pricking of ears. These became incensed at their more phlegmatic brothers, urging them on with numerous sly nips on their hinder quarters, Those, thus chidden, also contracted and helped spread the contagion.

At last the leader of the foremost sled uttered a sharp whine of satisfaction, crouching lower in the snow and throwing himself against the collar. The rest followed suit.

There was an ingathering of back bands, a tightening of traces; the sleds leaped forward, and the men clung to the gee poles, violently accelerating the uplift

of their feet that they might escape going under the runners.

The weariness of the day fell from them, and they whooped encouragement to the dogs. The animals responded with joyous yelps. They were swinging through the gathering darkness at a rattling gallop.

"Gee! Gee!" the men cried, each in turn, as their sleds abruptly left the main trail, heeling over on single runners like luggers on the wind.

Then came a hundred yards' dash to the lighted parchment window, which told its own story of the home cabin, the roaring Yukon stove, and the steaming pots of tea. But the home cabin had been invaded. Threescore huskies chorused defiance, and as many furry forms precipitated themselves upon the dogs which drew the first sled. The door was flung open, and a man, clad in the scarlet tunic of the Northwest Police, waded knee-deep among the furious brutes, calmly and impartially dispensing soothing justice with the butt end of a dog whip. After that the men shook hands; and in this wise was Malemute Kid welcomed to his own cabin by a stranger.

Stanley Prince, who should have welcomed him, and who was responsible for the Yukon stove and hot tea aforementioned, was busy with his guests. There were a dozen or so of them, as nondescript a crowd as ever served the Queen in the enforcement of her laws or the delivery of her mails. They were of many breeds, but their common life had formed of them a certain type—a lean and wiry type, with trail-hardened muscles, and sun-browned faces, and untroubled souls which gazed frankly forth, clear-eyed and steady.

They drove the dogs of the Queen, wrought fear in the hearts of her enemies, ate of her meager fare, and were happy. They had seen life, and done deeds, and lived romances; but they did not know it.

And they were very much at home. Two of them were sprawled upon Malemute Kid's bunk, singing chansons which their French forebears sang in the days when they first entered the Northwest land and mated with its Indian women.

Bettles' bunk had suffered a similar invasion, and three or four lusty *voyageurs* worked their toes among its blankets as they listened to the tale of one who had served on the boat brigade with Wolseley when he fought his way to Khartoum. And when he tired, a cowboy told of courts and kings and lords and ladies he had seen when Buffalo Bill toured the capitals of Europe. In a corner two half-breeds, ancient comrades in a lost campaign, mended harnesses and talked of the days when the Northwest flamed with insurrection and Louis Riel was king.

Rough jests and rougher jokes went up and down, and great hazards by trail and river were spoken of in the light of commonplaces, only to be recalled by virtue of some grain of humor or ludicrous happening. Prince was led away by these uncrowned heroes who had seen history made, who regarded the great and the romantic as but the ordinary and the incidental in the routine of life. He passed his precious tobacco among them with lavish disregard, and rusty chains of reminiscence were loosened, and forgotten odysseys resurrected for his especial benefit.

WHEN conversation dropped and the travelers filled the last pipes and unlashed their tight-rolled sleeping furs, Prince fell back upon his comrade for further information.

"Well, you know what the cowboy is," Malemute Kid answered, beginning to unlace his moccasins; "and it's not hard to guess the British blood in his bed partner. As for the rest, they're all children of the *coureurs du bois*, mingled with God knows how many other bloods. The two turning in by the door are the regulation 'breeds' or *Boisbrûles*. That lad with the worsted breech scarf—notice his eyebrows and the turn of his jaw—shows a Scotchman wept in his mother's smoky tepee. And that handsome-looking fellow putting the capote under his head is a French half-breed—you heard him talking; he doesn't like the two Indians turning in next to him. You see, when the 'breeds' rose under Riel the full-bloods kept the peace, and they've not lost much love for one another since."

"But I say, what's that glum-looking fellow by the stove? I'll swear he can't talk English. He hasn't opened his mouth all night."

"You're wrong. He knows English well enough. Did you follow his eyes when he listened? I did. But he's neither kith nor kin to the others. When they talked their

own patois you could see he didn't understand. I've been wondering myself what he is. Let's find out."

"Fire a couple of sticks into the stove!" Malemute Kid commanded, raising his voice and looking squarely at the man in question.

He obeyed at once.

"Had discipline knocked into him somewhere," Prince commented in a low tone.

Malemute Kid nodded, took off his socks, and picked his way among recumbent men to the stove. There he hung his damp footgear among a score or so of mates.

"When do you expect to get to Dawson?" he asked tentatively.

The man studied him a moment before replying. "They say seventy-five mile. So? Maybe two days."

The very slightest accent was perceptible, while there was no awkward hesitancy or groping for words.

"Been in the country before?"

"No."

"Northwest Territory?"

"Yes."

"Born there?"

"No."

"Well, where the devil were you born? You're none of these." Malemute Kid swept this hand over the dog drivers, even including the two policemen who had turned into Prince's bunk. "Where did you come from? I've seen faces like yours before, though I can't remember just where."

"I know you," he irrelevantly replied, at once turning the drift of Malemute Kid's questions.

"Where? Ever see me?"

"No, your partner, him priest, Pastilik, long time ago. Him ask me if I see you, Malemute Kid. Him give me grub. I no stop long. You hear him speak 'bout me?"

"Oh! you're the fellow that traded the otter skins for the dogs?"

The man nodded, knocked out his pipe, and signified his disinclinaion for conversation by rolling up in his furs. Malemute Kid blew out the slush lamp and crawled under the blankets with Prince.

"Well, what is he?"

"Don't know—turned me off, somehow, and then shut up like a clam. But he's a fellow to whet your curiosity. I've heard of him. All the coast wondered about him eight years ago. Sort of mysterious, you know. He came down out of the North, in the dead of winter, many a thousand miles from here, skirting Bering Sea and traveling as though the devil were after him. No one ever learned where he came from, but he must have come far. He was badly travel-worn when he got food from the Swedish missionary on Golovin Bay and asked the way south. We heard of this afterward. Then he abandoned the shore line, heading right across Norton Sound. Terrible weather, snowstorms and high winds, but he pulled through where a thousand other men would have died, missing St. Michael's and making the land at Pastilik. He'd lost all but two dogs, and was nearly gone with starvation.

"He was so anxious to go on that Father Roubeau fitted him out with grub; but he couldn't let him have any dogs, for he was only waiting my arrival to go on a trip himself. Mr. Ulysses knew too much to start on without animals, and fretted around for several days. He had on his sled a bunch of beautifully cured otter skins, sea otters, you know, worth their weight in gold. There was also at Pastilik an old Shylock of a Russian trader, who had dogs to kill. Well, they didn't dicker very long, but when the Strange One headed south again, it was in the rear of a spanking dog team. Mr. Shylock, by the way, had the otter skins. I saw them, and and they were magnificent. We figured it up and found the dogs brought him at least five hundred apiece. And it wasn't as if the Strange One didn't know the value of sea otter; he was an Indian of some sort, and what little he talked showed he'd been among white men.

"After the ice passed out of the sea, word came up from Nunivak Island that he'd gone in there for grub. Then he dropped from sight, and this is the first heard of him in eight years. Now where did he come from? And what was he doing there? And why did he come from there? He's Indian, he's been nobody knows where, and he's had discipline, which is unusual for an Indian. Another mystery of the North for you to solve, Prince."

"Thanks awfully, but I've got too many on hand as it is," he replied.

Malemute Kid was already breathing heavily; but the young mining engineer

gazed straight up through the thick darkness, waiting for the strange orgasm which stirred his blood to die away. And when he did sleep, his brain worked on, and for the nonce he, too, wandered through the white unknown, struggled with the dogs on endless trails, and saw men live, and toil, and die like men.

THE next morning, hours before daylight, the dog drivers and policemen pulled out for Dawson. But the powers that saw to Her Majesty's interests and ruled the destinies of her lesser creatures gave the mailmen little rest, for a week later they appeared at Stuart River, heavily burdened with letters for Salt Water. However, their dogs had been replaced by fresh ones; but, then, they were dogs.

The men had expected some sort of a layover in which to rest up; besides, this Klondike was a new section of the Northland, and they had wished to see a little something of the Golden City where dust flowed like water and dance halls rang with never-ending revelry. But they dried their socks and smoked their evening pipes with much the same gusto as on their former visit, though one or two bold spirits speculated on desertion and the possibility of crossing the unexplored Rockies to the east, and thence, by the Mackenzie Valley, of gaining their old stamping grounds in the Chippewyan country. Two or three even decided to return to their homes by that route when their terms of service had expired, and they began to lay plans forthwith, looking forward to the hazardous undertaking in much the same way a city-bred man would to a day's holiday in the woods.

He of the Otter Skins seemed very restless, though he took little interest in the discussion, and at last he drew Malemute Kid to one side and talked for some time in low tones. Prince cast curious eyes in their direction, and the mystery deepened when they put on caps and mittens and went outside. When they returned, Malemute Kid placed his gold scales on the table, weighed out the matter of sixty ounces, and transferred them to the Strange One's sack. Then the chief of the dog drivers joined the conclave, and certain business was transacted with him. The next day the gang went on upriver, but He of the Otter Skins took several pounds of grub and turned his steps back toward Dawson.

"Didn't know what to make of it," said Malemute Kid in response to Prince's queries, "but the poor beggar wanted to be quit of the service for some reason or other—at least it seemed a most important one to him, though he wouldn't let on what. You see, it's just like the army: he signed for two years, and the only way to get free was to buy himself out. He couldn't desert and then stay here, and he was just wild to remain in the country. Made up his mind when he got to Dawson, he said; but no one knew him, hadn't a cent, and I was the only one he'd spoken two words with. So he talked it over with the lieutenant-governor, and made arrangements in case he could get the money from me—loan, you know. Said he'd pay back in the year, and, if I wanted, would put me onto something rich. Never'd seen it, but knew it was rich.

"And talk! why, when he got me outside he was ready to weep. Begged and pleaded; got down in the snow to me till I hauled him out of it. Palavered around like a crazy man. Swore he's worked to this very end for years and years, and couldn't bear to be disappointed now. Asked him what end, but he wouldn't say. Said they might keep him on the other half of the trail and he wouldn't get to Dawson in two years, and then it would be too late. Never saw a man take on so in my life. And when I said I'd let him have it, had to yank him out of the snow again. Told him to consider it in the light of a grubstake. Think he'd have it? No sir! Swore he'd give me all he found, make me rich beyond the dreams of avarice, and all such stuff. Now a man who puts his life and time against a grubstake ordinarily finds it hard enough to turn over half of what he finds. Something behind all this, Prince; just you make a note of it. We'll hear of him if he stays in the country—"

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then my good nature gets a shock, and I'm sixty some odd ounces out."

THE cold weather had come on with the long nights, and the sun had begun to play his ancient game of peekaboo along the southern snow line ere aught was heard of Malemute Kid's grubstake. And

then, one bleak morning in early January, a heavily laden dog train pulled into his cabin below Stuart River. He of the Otter Skins was there, and with him walked a man such as the gods have almost forgotten how to fashion. Men never talked of luck and pluck and five-hundred-dollar dirt without bringing in the name of Axel Gunderson: or could tales of nerve or strength or daring pass up and down the campfire without the summoning of his presence. And when the conversation flagged, it blazed anew at mention of the woman who shared his fortunes.

As has been noted, in the making of Axel Gunderson the gods had remembered their old-time cunning and cast him after the manner of men who were born when the world was young. Full seven feet he towered in his picturesque costume which marked a king of Eldorado. His chest, neck, and limbs were those of a giant.

To bear his three hundred pounds of bone and muscle, his snowshoes were greater by a generous yard than those of other men. Rough-hewn, with rugged brow and massive jaw and unflinching eyes of palest blue, his face told the tale of one who knew but the law of might.

Of the yellow of ripe corn silk, his frost-incrusted hair swept like day across the night and fell far down his coat of bear-skin.

A vague tradition of the sea seemed to cling about him as he swung down the narrow trail in advance of the dogs; and he brought the butt of his dog whip against Malemute Kid's door as a Norse sea rover, on southern foray, might thunder for admittance at the castle gate.

Prince bared his womanly arms and kneaded sour-dough bread, casting, as he did so, many a glance at the three guests—three guests the like of which might never come under a man's roof in a lifetime. The Strange One, whom Malemute Kid had surnamed Ulysses, still fascinated him; but his interest chiefly gravitated between Axel Gunderson and Axel Gunderson's wife.

She felt the day's journey, for she had softened in comfortable cabins during the many days since her husband mastered the wealth of frozen pay streaks, and she was tired. She rested against his great breast like a slender flower against a wall, replying lazily to Malemute Kid's good-natured banter, and stirring Prince's blood strangely with an occasional sweep of her deep, dark eyes. For Prince was a man, and healthy, and had seen few women in many months. And she was older than he, and an Indian besides. But she was different from all native wives he had met: she had traveled—had been in his country among others, he gathered from the conversation; and she knew most of the things the women of his own race knew, and much more that it was not in the nature of things for them to know.

She could make a meal of sun-dried fish or a bed in the snow; yet she teased them with tantalizing details of many-course dinners; and caused strange internal dissensions to arise at the mention of various quondam dishes which they had well-nigh forgotten. She knew the ways of the moose, the bear, and the little blue fox, and of the wild amphibians of the Northern seas; she was skilled in the lore of the woods and the streams, and the tale writ by man and bird and beast upon the delicate snow crust was to her an open book; yet Prince caught the appreciative twinkle in her eye as she read the Rules of the Camp. These rules had been fathered by the Unquenchable Bettles at a time when his blood ran high, and were remarkable for the terse simplicity of their humor. Prince always turned them to the wall before the arrival of ladies; but who could suspect that this native wife—Well, it was too late now.

This, then, was the wife of Axel Gunderson, a woman whose name and fame had traveled with her husband's, hand in hand, through all the Northland. At table, Malemute Kid baited her with the assurance of an old friend, and Prince shook off the shyness of first acquaintance and joined in. But she held her own in the unequal contest, while her husband, slower in wit, ventured naught but applause. And he was very proud of her; his every look and action revealed the magnitude of the place she occupied in his life.

He of the Otter Skins ate in silence, forgotten in the merry battle; and long ere the others were done he pushed back from the table and went out among the dogs. Yet all too soon his fellow travelers drew on their mittens and parkas and followed him.

There had been no snow for many days, and the sleds slipped along the hard-packed Yukon trail as easily as if it had been glare ice.

Ulysses led the first sled; with the second came Prince and Axel Gunderson's wife; while Malemute Kid and the yellow-haired giant brought up the third.

"It's only a hunch, Kid," he said, "but I think it's straight. He's never been there, but he tells a good story, and shows a map I heard of when I was in the Kootenay country years ago. I'd like to have you go along; but he's a strange one, and swore point-blank to throw it up if anyone was brought in. But when I come back you'll get first tip, and I'll stake you next to me, and give you a half share in the town site besides.

"No! no!" he cried, as the other strove to interrupt. "I'm running this, and before I'm done it'll need two heads. If it's all right, why, it'll be a second Cripple Creek, man; do you hear? — A second Cripple Creek! It's quartz, you know, not placer; and if we work it right we'll corral the whole thing—millions upon millions. I've heard of the place before, and so have you. We'll build a town—thousands of workmen — good waterways — steamship lines—big carrying trade—light-draughts steamers for head reaches—survey a railroad, perhaps — sawmills — electric-light plant—do our own banking—commercial company—syndicate—Say! just you hold your hush till I get back!"

The sleds came to a halt where the trail crossed the mouth of Stuart River. An unbroken sea of frost, its wide expanse stretched away into the unknown east. The snowshoes were withdrawn from the lashings of the sleds. Axel Gunderson shook hands and stepped to the fore, his great webbed shoes sinking a fair half yard into the feathery surface and packing the snow so the dogs should not wallow. His wife fell in behind the last sled, betraying long practice in the art of handling the awkward footgear.

The stillness was broken with cheery farewells; the dogs whined; and He of the Otter Skins talked with his whip to a recalcitrant wheeler.

An hour later the train had taken on the likeness of a black pencil crawling across a mighty sheet of foolscap.

II

ONE NIGHT, many weeks later, Malemute Kid and Prince fell to solving chess problems from the torn page of an ancient magazine. The Kid had just returned from his Bonanza properties and was resting up preparatory to a long moose hunt. Prince, too, had been on creek and trail nearly all winter, and had grown hungry for a blissful week of cabin life.

"Interpose the black knight, and force the king. No, that won't do. See, the next move—"

"Why advance the pawn two squares? Bound to take it in transit, and with the bishop out of the way—"

"But hold on! That leaves a hole, and—

"No; it's protected. Go ahead! You'll see it works."

It was very interesting. Somebody knocked at the door a second time before Malemute Kid said, "Come in." The door swung open. Something staggered in. Prince caught one square look and sprang to his feet. The horror in his eyes caused Malemute Kid to whirl about; and he, too, was startled, though he had seen bad things before. The thing tottered blindly toward them. Prince edged away till he reached the nail from which hung his gun.

"My God! What is it?" he whispered to Malemute Kid.

"Don't know. Looks like a case of freezing and no grub," replied the Kid, sliding away in the opposite direction. "Watch out! It may be mad," he warned, coming back from closing the door.

The thing advanced to the table. The bright flame of the slush lamp caught its eye. It was amused, and gave voice to eldritch cackles which betokened mirth. Then, suddenly, he—for it was a man—swayed back, with a hitch to his skin trousers, and began to sing a chantey, such as men lift when they swing around the capstan circle and the sea snorts in their ears:

"Yan-kee ship come down de ri-ib-er,
Pull! my bully boys! Pull!
D'yeh want—to know de captain ru-uns her?
Pull! my bully boys! Pull!
Jon-a-than Jones ob South Caho-li-in-a,
Pull! my bully—"

He broke off abruptly, tottered with a wolfish snarl to the meat shelf, and before they could intercept was tearing with his teeth at a chunk of raw bacon. The struggle was fierce between him and Malemute Kid; but his mad strength left him as suddenly as it had come, and he weakly surrendered the spoil.

Between them they got him upon a stool, where he sprawled with half his body across the table. A small dose of whiskey strengthened him, so that he could dip a spoon into the sugar caddy which Malemute Kid placed before him. After his appetite had been somewhat cloyed, Prince, shuddering as he did so, passed him a mug of weak beef tea.

The creature's eyes were alight with a somber frenzy, which blazed and waned with every mouthful. There was very little skin to the face. The face, for that matter, sunken and emaciated, bore little likeness to human countenance. Frost after frost had bitten deeply, each depositing its stratum of scab upon the half-healed scar that went before.

This dry, hard surface was of a bloody-black color, serrated by grievous cracks wherein the raw red flesh peeped forth. His skin garments were dirty and in tatters, and the fur of one side was singed and burned away, showing where he had lain upon his fire.

Malemute Kid pointed to where the sun-tanned hide had been cut away, strip by strip—the grim signature of famine.

"Who—are—you?" slowly and distinctly enunciated the Kid.

The man paid no heed.

"Where do you come from?"

"Yan-kee ship come down de ri-ib-er," was the quavering response.

"Don't doubt the beggar came down the river," the Kid said, shaking him in an endeavor to start a more lucid flow of talk.

But the man shrieked at the contact, clapping a hand to his side in evident pain. He rose slowly to his feet, half leaning on the table.

"She laughed at me—so—with the hate in her eye; and she—would—not—come."

His voice died away, and he was sinking back when Malemute Kid gripped him by the wrist and shouted, "Who? Who would not come?"

"She, Unga. She laughed, and struck at me, so, and so. And then—"

"Yes?"

"And then—"

"And then what?"

"And then he lay very still in the snow a long time. He is—still in—the—snow."

The two men looked at each other helplessly.

"Who is in the snow?"

"She, Unga. She looked at me with hate in her eye, and then—"

"Yes, yes."

"And then she took the knife, so; and once, twice—she was weak. I traveled very slow. And there is much gold in that place, very much gold."

"Where is Unga?" For all Malemute Kid knew, she might be dying a mile away. He shook the man savagely, repeating again and again, "Where is Unga? Who is Unga?"

"She—is—in—the—snow."

"Go on!" The Kid was pressing his wrist cruelly.

"So—I—would—be—in—the snow—but—I—had—a—debt—to—pay. It—was—heavy—I—had—a—debt—to—pay—a—debt—to—pay—I—had——" The faltering monosyllables ceased as he fumbled in his pouch and drew forth a buckskin sack. "A—debt—to—pay—five — pounds — of — gold — grub—stake—Mal—e—mute—Kid—I——" The exhausted head dropped upon the table; nor could Malemute Kid rouse it again.

"It's Ulysses," he said quietly, tossing the bag of dust on the table. "Guess it's all day with Axel Gunderson and the woman. Come on, let's get him between the blankets. He's Indian; he'll pull through and tell a tale besides."

As they cut his garments from him, near his right breast could be seen two unhealed, hard-lipped knife thrusts.

III

"I WILL talk of the things which were in my own way; but you will understand. I will begin at the beginning, and tell of myself and the woman, and, after that, of the man."

He of the Otter Skins drew over to the stove as do men who have been deprived of fire and are afraid the Prome-

thean gift may vanish at any moment. Malemute Kid pricked up the slush lamp and placed it so its light might fall upon the face of the narrator. Prince slid his body over the edge of the bunk and joined them.

"I am Naass, a chief, and the son of a chief, born between a sunset and a rising, on the dark seas, in my father's oomiak. All of a night the men toiled at the paddles, and the women cast out the waves which threw in upon us, and we fought with the storm. The salt spray froze upon my mother's breast till her breath passed with the passing of the tide. But I—I raised my voice with the wind and the storm, and lived.

"We dwelt in Akatan—"

"Where?" asked Malemute Kid.

"Akatan, which is in the Aleutians; Akatan, beyond Chignik, beyond Kardalak, beyond Unimak. As I say, we dwelt in Akatan, which lies in the midst of the sea on the edge of the world. We farmed the salt seas for the fish, the seal, and the otter; and our homes shouldered about one anotlier on the rocky strip between the rim of the forest and the yellow beach where our kayaks lay. We were not many, and the world was very small. There were strange lands to the east — islands like Akatan; so we thought all the world was islands and did not mind.

"I was different from my people. In the sands of the beach were the crooked timbers and wave-warped planks of a boat such as my people never built; and I remember on the point of the island which overlooked the ocean three ways there stood a pine tree which never grew there, smooth and straight and tall. It is said the two men came to that spot, turn about, through many days, and watched with the passing of the light. These two men came from out of the sea in the boat which lay in pieces on the beach. And they were white like you, and weak as the little children when the seal have gone away and the hunters come home empty. I know of these things from the old men and the old women, who got them from their fathers and mothers before them. These strange white men did not take kindly to our ways at first, but they grew strong, what of the fish and the oil, and fierce. And they built them each his own house, and took the pick of our women, and in time children came. Thus he was born who was to become the father of my father's father.

"As I said, I was different from my people, for I carried the strong, strange blood of this white man who came out of the sea. It is said we had other laws in the days before these men; but they were fierce and quarrelsome, and fought with our men till there were no more left who dared to fight. Then they made themselves chiefs, and took away our old laws and gave us new ones, insomuch that the man was the son of his father, and not his mother, as our way had been. They also ruled that the son, first-born, should have all things which were his father's before him, and that the brothers and sisters should shift for themselves. And they gave us other laws. They showed us new ways in the catching of fish and the killing of bear which were thick in the woods; and they taught us to lay by bigger stores for the time of famine. And these things were good.

"But when they had become chiefs, and there were no more men to face their anger, they fought, these strange white men, each with the other. And the one whose blood I carry drove his seal spear the length of an arm through the other's body. Their children took up the fight, and their children's children; and there was great hatred between them, and black doings, even to my time, so that in each family but one lived to pass down the blood of them that went before. Of my blood I was alone; of the other man's there was but a girl. Unga, who lived with her mother. Her father and my father did not come back from the fishing one night; but afterward they washed up to the beach on the big tides, and they held very close to each other.

"The people wondered, because of the hatred between the houses, and the old men shook their heads and said the fight would go on when children were born to her and children to me. They told me this as a boy, till I came to believe, and to look upon Unga as a foe, who was to be the mother of children which were to fight with mine. I thought of these things day by day, and when I grew to a stripling I came to ask why this should be so. And

they answered, 'We do not know, but that in such way your fathers did.' And I marveled that those which were to come should fight the battles of those that were gone, and in it I could see no right. But the people said it must be, and I was only a stripling.

"And they said I must hurry, that my blood might be the older and grow strong before hers. This was easy, for I was head man, and the people looked up to me because of the deeds and the laws of my fathers, and the wealth which was mine. Any maiden would come to me, but I found none to my liking. And the old men and the mothers of maidens told me to hurry, for even then were the hunters bidding high to the mother of Unga; and should her children grow strong before mine, mine would surely die.

"NOR did I find a maiden till one night coming back from the fishing. The sunlight was lying, so, low and full in the eyes, the wind free, and the kayaks racing with the white seas. Of a sudden the kayak of Unga came driving past me, and she looked upon me, so, with her black hair flying like a cloud of night and the spray wet on her cheek. As I say, the sunlight was full in the eyes, and I was a stripling; but somehow it was all clear, and I knew it to be the call of kind to kind. As she whipped ahead she looked back within the space of two strokes—looked as only the woman Unga could look—and again I knew it as the call of kind.

As she whipped ahead she looked past the lazy oomiaks and left them far behind. But she was quick at the paddle, and my heart was like the belly of a sail, and I did not gain. The wind freshened, the sea whitened, and, leaping like the seals on the windward breech, we roared down the golden pathway of the sun."

Naass was crouched half out of his stool, in the attitude of one driving a paddle, as he ran the race anew. Somewhere across the stove he beheld the tossing kayak and the flying hair of Unga. The voice of the wind was in his ears, and its salt beat fresh upon his nostrils.

"But she made the shore, and ran up the sand, laughing, to the house of her mother. And a great thought came to me that night—a thought worthy of him that was chief over all the people of Akatan. So, when the moon was up, I went down to the house of her mother, and looked upon the goods of Yash-Noosh, which were piled by the door—the goods of Yash-Noosh, a strong hunter who had it in mind to be the father of the children of Unga.

Other young men had piled their goods there and taken them away again; and each young man had made a pile greater than the one before.

"And I laughed to the moon and the stars, and went to my own house where my wealth was stored. And many trips I made, till my pile was greater by the fingers of one hand than the pile of Yash-Noosh. There were fish, dried in the sun and smoked; and forty hides of the hair seal, and half as many of the fur, and each hide was tied at the mouth and big bellied with oil; and ten skins of bear which I killed in the woods when they came out in the spring. And there were beads and blankets and scarlet cloths, such as I got in trade from the people who lived to the east, and who got them in trade from the people who lived still beyond in the east. And I looked upon the pile of Yash-Noosh and laughed, for I was head man in Akatan, and my wealth was greater than the wealth of all my young men, and my fathers had done deeds, and given laws, and put their names for all time in the mouths of the people.

"So, when the morning came, I went down to the beach, casting out of the corner of my eye at the house of the mother of Unga. My offer yet stood untouched. And the women smiled, and said sly things one to the other. I wondered, for never had such a price been offered; and that night I added more to the pile, and put beside it a kayak of well-tanned skins which never yet had swam in the sea.

"But in the day it was yet there, open to the laughter of all men. The mother of Unga was crafty, and I grew angry at the shame in which I stood before my people. So that night I added till it became a great pile, and I hauled up my oomiak, which was of the value of twenty kayaks. And in the morning there was no pile.

IV

"THEN made I preparation for the wedding, and the people that lived even to the east came for the food of the feast and the potlatch token. Unga was older than I by the age of four suns in the way we reckoned the years. I was only a stripling; but then I was a chief, and the son of a chief, and it did not matter.

"But a ship shoved her sails above the floor of the ocean, and grew larger with the breath of the wind. From her scuppers she ran clear water, and the men were in haste and worked hard at the pumps. On the bow stood a mighty man, watching the depth of the water and giving commands with a voice of thunder. His eyes were of the pale blue of the deep waters, and his head was maned like that of a sea lion. And his hair was yellow, like the straw of a southern harvest or the manila rope yarns which sailormen plait.

"Of late years we had seen ships from afar, but this was the first to come to the beach of Akatan. The feast was broken, and the women and children fled to the houses, while we men strung our bows and waited with spears in hand. But when the ship's forefoot smelled the beach the strange men took no notice of us, being busy with their own work. With the falling of the tide they careened the schooner and patched a great hole in her bottom. So the women crept back, and the feast went on.

"When the tide rose, the sea wanderers kedged the schooner to deep water and then came among us. They bore presents and were friendly; so I made room for them, and out of the largeness of my heart gave them tokens such as I gave all the guests, for it was my wedding day, and I was head man in Akatan. And he with the mane of the sea lion was there, so tall and strong that one looked to see the earth shake with the fall of his feet. He looked much and straight at Unga, with his arms folded, so, and stayed till the sun went away and the stars came out. Then he went down to his ship. After that I took Unga by the hand and led her to my own house. And there was singing and great laughter, and the women said sly things, after the manner of women at such times. But we did not care. Then the people left us alone and went home.

"The last noise had not died away when the chief of the sea wanderers came in by the door. And he had with him black bottles, from which we drank and made merry. You see, I was only a stripling, and had lived all my days on the edge of the world. So my blood became as fire, and my heart as light as the froth that flies from the surf to the cliff. Unga sat silent among the skins in the corner, her eyes wide, for she seemed to fear. And he with the mane of the sea lion looked upon her straight and long. Then his men came in with bundles of goods, and he piled before me wealth such as was not in all Akatan. There were guns, both large and small, and powder and shot and shell, and bright axes and knives of steel, and cunning tools, and strange things the like of which I had never seen. When he showed me by sign that it was all mine, I thought him a great man to be so free; but he showed me also that Unga was to go away with him in his ship. Do you understand? —that Unga was to go away with him in his ship. The blood of my fathers flamed hot on the sudden, and I made to drive him through with my spear. But the spirit of the bottles had stolen the life from my arm, and he took me by the neck, so, and knocked my head against the wall of the house. And I was made weak like a newborn child, and my legs would no more stand under me. Unga screamed, and she laid hold of the things of the house with her hands, till they fell all about us as he dragged her to the door. Then he took her in his great arms, and when she tore at his yellow hair he laughed with a sound like that of the big bull seal in the rut.

"I crawled to the beach and called upon my people, but they were afraid. Only Yash-Noosh was a man, and they struck him on the head with an oar, till he lay with his face in the sand and did not move. And they raised the sails to the sound of their songs, and the ship went away on the wind.

"The people said it was good, for there would be no more war of the bloods in Akatan; but I said never a word, waiting till the time of the full moon, when I put fish and oil in my kayak and went away to the east. I saw many islands and many people, and I, who had lived on the edge,

saw that the world was very large. I talked by signs; but they had not seen a schooner nor a man with the mane of a sea lion, and they pointed always to the east. And I slept in queer places, and ate odd things, and met strange faces. Many laughed, for they thought me light of head; but sometimes old men turned my face to the light and blessed me, and the eyes of the young women grew soft as they asked me of the strange ship, and Unga, and the men of the sea.

"AND in this manner, through rough seas and great storms, I came to Unalaska. There were two schooners there, but neither was the one I sought. So I passed on to the east, with the world growing ever larger, and in the island of Unamok there was no word of the ship, nor in Kadiak, nor in Atognak. And so I came one day to a rocky land, where men dug great holes in the mountain. And there was a schooner, but not my schooner, and men loaded upon it the rocks which they dug. This I thought childish, for all the world was made of rocks; but they gave me food and set me to work. When the schooner was deep in the water, the captain gave me money and told me to go; but I asked which way he went, and he pointed south. I made signs that I would go with him, and he laughed at first, but then, being short of men, took me to help work the ship. So I came to talk after their manner, and to heave on ropes, and to reef the stiff sails in sudden squalls, and to take my turn at the wheel. But it was not strange, for the blood of my fathers was the blood of the men of the sea.

"I had thought it an easy task to find him I sought, once I got among his own people; and when we raised the land one day, and passed between a gateway of the sea to a port, I looked for perhaps as many schooners as there were fingers to my hands. But the ships lay against the wharves for miles, packed like so many little fish; and when I went among them to ask for a man with the mane of a sea lion, they laughed, and answered me in the tongues of many peoples. And I found that they hailed from the uttermost parts of the earth.

"And I went into the city to look upon the face of every man. But they were like the cod when they run thick on the banks, and I could not count them. And the noise smote upon me till I could not hear, and my head was dizzy with much movement. So I went on and on, through the lands which sang in the warm sunshine; where the harvests lay rich on the plains; and where great cities were fat with men that lived like women, with false words in their mouths and their hearts black with the lust of gold. And all the while my people of Akatan hunted and fished, and were happy in the thought that the world was small.

"But the look in the eyes of Unga coming home from the fishing was with me always, and I knew I would find her when the time was met. She walked down quiet lanes in the dusk of the evening, or led me chases across the thick fields wet with the morning dew, and there was a promise in her eyes such as only the woman Unga could give.

"So I wandered through a thousand cities. Some were gentle and gave me food, and others laughed, and still others cursed; but I kept my tongue between my teeth, and went strange ways and saw strange sights. Sometimes I, who was a chief and the son of a chief, toiled for men—men rough of speech and hard as iron, who wrung gold from the sweat and sorrow of their fellow men. Yet no word did I get of my quest till I came back to the sea like a homing seal to the rookeries. But this was at another port, in another country which lay to the north. And there I heard dim tales of the yellow-haired sea wanderer, and I learned that he was a hunter of seals, and that even then he was abroad on the ocean.

"So I shipped on a seal schooner with the lazy Siwashes, and followed his trackless trail to the north where the hunt was then warm. And we were away weary months, and spoke many of the fleet, and heard much of the wild doings of him I sought; but never once did we raise him above the sea. We went north, even to the Pribilofs, and killed the seals in herds on the beach, and brought their warm bodies aboard till our scuppers ran grease and blood and no man could stand upon the deck. Then were we chased by a ship of slow steam, which fired upon us with great guns. But we put on sail till the sea was

over our decks and washed them clean, and lost ourselves in a fog.

"It is said, at this time, while we fled with fear at our hearts, that the yellow-haired sea wanderer put in to the Pribilofs, right to the factory, and while the part of his men held the servants of the company, the rest loaded ten thousand green skins from the salt houses. I say it is said, but I believe; for in the voyages I made on the coast with never a meeting the northern seas rang with his wildness and daring, till the three nations which have lands there sought him with their ships. And I heard of Unga, for the captains sang loud in her praise, and she was always with him. She had learned the ways of his people, they said, and was happy. But I knew better—knew that her heart harked back to her own people by the yellow beach of Atakan.

"SO, after a long time, I went back to the port which is by a gateway of the sea, and there I learned that he had gone across the girth of the great ocean to hunt for the seal to the east of the warm land which runs south from the Russian Seas. And I, who was become a sailorman, shipped with men of his own race, and went after him in the hunt of the seal. And there were few ships off that new land; but we hung on the flank of the seal pack and harried it north through all the spring of the year. And when the cows were heavy with pup and crossed the Russian line, our men grumbled and were afraid. For there was much fog, and every day men were lost in the boats. They would not work, so the captain turned the ship back toward the way it came. But I knew the yellow-haired sea wanderer was unafraid, and would hang by the pack, even to the Russian Isles, where few men go. So I took a boat, in the black of night, when the lookout dozed on the fo'c'slehead, and went alone to the warm, long land. And I journeyed south to meet the men by Yeddo Bay, who are wild and unafraid. And the Yoshiwara girls were small, and bright like steel, and good to look upon; but I could not stop, for I knew that Unga rolled on the tossing floor by the rookeries of the north.

"The men by Yeddo Bay had met from the ends of the earth, and had neither gods nor homes, sailing under the flag of the Japanese. And with them I went to the rich beaches of Copper Island, where our salt piles became high with skins. And in that silent sea we saw no man till we were ready to come away. Then one day the fog lifted on the edge of a heavy wind, and there jammed down upon us a schooner, with close in her wake the cloudy funnels of a Russian man-of-war. We fled away on the beam of the wind, with the schooner jamming still closer and plunging ahead three feet to our two. And upon her poop was the man with the mane of the sea lion, pressing the rails under with the canvas and laughing in his strength of life. And Unga was there—I knew her on the moment—but he sent her below when the cannons began to talk across the sea. As I say, with three feet to our two, till we saw the rudder lift green at every jump—and I swinging on to the wheel and cursing, with my back to the Russian shot. For we knew he had it in mind to run before us, that he might get away while we were caught. And they knocked our masts out of us till we dragged into the wind like a wounded gull; but he went on over the edge of the sky line—he and Unga.

"What could we? The fresh hides spoke for themselves. So they took us to a Russian port, and after that to a lone country, where they set us to work in the mines to dig salt. And some died, and—and some did not die."

Naass swept the blanket from his shoulders, disclosing the gnarled and twisted flesh, marked with the unmistakable striations of the knout. Prince hastily covered him, for it was not nice to look upon.

"We were there a weary time and sometimes men got away to the south, but they always came back. So, when we who hailed from Yeddo Bay rose in the night and took the guns from the guards, we went to the north. And the land was very large, with plains, soggy with water, and great forests. And the cold came, with much snow on the ground, and no man knew the way. Weary months we journeyed through the endless forest—I do not remember, now, for there was little food and often we lay down to die. But at last we came to the cold sea, and but

three were left to look upon it. One had shipped from Yeddo as captain, and he knew in his head the lay of the great lands, and of the place where men may cross from one to the other on the ice. And he led us—I do not know, it was so long—till there were but two. When we came to that place we found five of the strange people which live in that country, and they had dogs and skins, and we were very poor. We fought in the snow till they died, and the captain died, and the dogs and skins were mine. Then I crossed on the ice, which was broken, and once I drifted till a gale from the west put me upon the shore. And after that, Golovin Bay, Pastilik, and the priest. Then south, south, to the warm sunlands where first I wandered.

"But the sea was no longer fruitful, and those who went upon it after the seal went to little profit and great risk. The fleets scattered, and the captains and the men had no word of those I sought. So I turned away from the ocean which never rests, and went among the lands, where the trees, the houses, and the mountains sit always in one place and do not move. I journeyed far, and came to learn many things, even to the way of reading and writing from books. It was well I should do this, for it came upon me that Unga must know these things, and that someday, when the time was met—we—you understand, when the time was met.

"So I drifted, like those little fish which raise a sail to the wind but cannot steer. But my eyes and my ears were open always, and I went among men who traveled much, for I knew they had but to see those I sought to remember. At last there came a man, fresh from the mountains, with pieces of rock in which the free gold stood to the size of peas, and he had heard, he had met, he knew them. They were rich, he said, and lived in the place where they drew gold from the ground.

"It was in a wild country, and very far away; but in time I came to the camp, hidden between the mountains, where men worked night and day, out of the sight of the sun. Yet the time was not come. I listened to the talk of the people. He had gone away—they had gone away—to England, it was said, in the matter of bringing men with much money together to form companies.

"But why so many words? I was a sailorman, and knew the ways of the ships on the seas. I followed to England, and then to other countries. Sometimes I heard of them by word of mouth, sometimes I read of them in the papers; yet never once could I come by them, for they had much money, and traveled fast, while I was a poor man. Then came trouble upon them, and their wealth slipped away one day like a curl of smoke. The papers were full of it at the time; but after that nothing was said, and I knew they had gone back where more gold could be got from the ground.

V

"THEY had dropped out of the world, being now poor, and so I wandered from camp to camp, even north to the Kootenay country, where I picked up the cold scent. They had come and gone, some said this way, and some that, and still others that they had gone to the country of the Yukon. And I went this way, and I went that, ever journeying from place to place, till it seemed that I must grow weary of the world which was so large. But in the Kootenay I traveled a bad trail, and a long trail, with a breed of the Northwest, who saw fit to die when the famine pinched. He had been to the Yukon by an unknown way over the mountains, and when he knew his time was near gave me the map and the secret of a place where he swore by his gods there was much gold.

"After that all the world began to flock into the north. I was a poor man; I sold myself to be a driver of dogs. The rest you know. I met him and her in Dawson. She did not know me, for I was only a stripling, and her life had been large, so she had no time to remember the one who had paid for her an untold price.

"So? You bought me from my term of service. I went back to bring things about in my own way, for I had waited long, and now that I had my hand upon him was in no hurry. As I say, I had it in mind to do my own way, for I read back in my life, through all I had seen and suffered, and remembered the cold and hunger of

the endless forest by the Russian Seas. As you know, I led him into the east—him and Unga—into the east where many have gone and few returned. I led them to the spot where the bones and the curses of men lie with the gold which they may not have.

"The way was long and the trail unpacked. Our dogs were many and ate much; nor could our sleds carry till the break of spring. We must come back before the river ran free. So here and there we cached grub, that our sleds might be lightened and there be no chance of famine on the back trip. At the McQuestion there were three men, and near them we built a cache, as also did we at the Mayo, where was a hunting camp of a dozen Pellys which had crossed the divide from the south. After that, as we went on into the east, we saw no men; only the sleeping river, the moveless forest, and the White Silence of the North.

"We now made smaller caches, and in the nighttime it was a small matter to go back on the trail we had broken and change them in such way that one might deem the wolverines the thieves. Again there be places where there is a fall to the river, and the water is unruly, and the ice makes above and is eaten away beneath. In such a spot the sled I drove broke through, and the dogs; and to him and Unga it was ill luck, but no more. And there was much grub on that sled, and the dogs the strongest. But he laughed, for he was strong of life, and gave the dogs that were left little grub till we cut them from the harnesses one by one and fed them to their mates. We could go home light, he said, traveling and eating from cache to cache, with neither dogs nor sleds; which was true, for our grub was very short, and the last dog died in the traces the night we came to the gold and the bones and the curses of men.

"To reach that place — and the map spoke true — in the heart of the great mountains, we cut ice steps against the wall of a divide. One looked for a valley beyond, but there was no valley; the snow spread away, level as the great harvest plains, and here and there about us mighty mountains shoved their white heads among the stars. And midway on that strange plain which should have been a valley the earth and the snow fell away, straight down toward the heart of the world. Had we not been sailormen our heads would have swung round with the sight, but we stood on the dizzy edge that we might see a way to get down. And on one side, and one side only, the wall had fallen away till it was like the slope of the decks in a topsail breeze. I do not know why this thing should be so, but it was so. 'It is the mouth of hell,' he said; 'let us go down.' And we went down.

"And on the bottom there was a cabin, built by some man, of logs which he had cast down from above. It was a very old cabin, for men had died there alone at different times, and on pieces of birch bark which were there we read their last words and their curses. One had died of scurvy; another's partner had robbed him of his last grub and powder and stolen away; a third had been mauled by a baldface grizzly; a fourth had hunted for game and starved—and so it went, and they had been loath to leave the gold, and had died by the side of it in one way or another. And the worthless gold they had gathered yellowed the floor of the cabin like in a dream.

"But his soul was steady, and his head clear, this man I had led thus far. 'We have nothing to eat,' he said, 'and we will only look upon this gold, and see whence it comes and how much there be. Then we will go away quick, before it gets into our eyes and steals away our judgment. And in this way we may return in the end, with more grub, and possess it all.' So we looked upon the great vein, which cut the wall of the pit as a true vein should, and we measured it, and traced it from above and below, and drove the stakes of the claims and blazed the trees in token of our rights. Then, our knees shaking with lack of food, and a sickness in our bellies, and our hearts chugging close to our mouths, we climbed the mighty wall for the last time and turned our faces to the back trip.

"The last stretch we dragged Unga between us, and we fell often, but in the end we made the cache. And lo, there was no grub. It was well done, for he thought it the wolverines, and damned them and his gods in the one breath. But Unga was brave, and smiled, and put her hand in his, till I turned away that I might hold myself.

'We will rest by the fire,' she said, 'till morning, and we will gather strength from our moccasins.' So we cut the tops of our moccasins in strips, and boiled them half of the night, that we might chew them and swallow them. And in the morning we talked of our chance. The next cache was five days' journey; we could not make it. We must find game.

"'We will go forth and hunt,' he said.

"And he ruled that Unga stay by the fire and save her strength. And we went forth, he in quest of the moose and I to the cache I had changed. But I ate little, so they might not see in me much strength. And in the night he fell many times as he drew into camp. And I, too, made to suffer great weakness, stumbling over my snowshoes as though each step might be my last. And we gathered strength from our moccasins.

"HE was a great man. His soul lifted his body to the last; nor did he cry aloud, save for the sake of Unga. On the second day I followed him, that I might not miss the end. And he lay down to rest often. That night he was near gone; but in the morning he swore weakly and went forth again. He was like a drunken man, and I looked many times for him to give up, but his was the strength of the strong, and his soul the soul of a giant, for he lifted his body through all the weary day. And he shot two ptarmigan, but would not eat them. He needed no fire; they meant life; but his thought was for Unga, and he turned toward camp. He no longer walked, but crawled on hand and knee through the snow. I came to him, and read death in his eyes. Even then it was not too late to eat of the ptarmigan. He cast away his rifle and carried the birds in his mouth like a dog. I walked by his side, upright. And he looked at me during the moments he rested, and wondered that I was so strong. I could see it, though he no longer spoke; and when his lips moved, they moved without sound. As I say, he was a great man, and my heart spoke for softness; but I read back in my life, and remembered the cold and hunger of the endless forest by the Russian Seas. Besides, Unga was mine, and I had paid for her an untold price of skin and boat and bead.

"As I say, we came thus through the forest, till the smell of the camp smoke was in our nostrils. And I bent above him, and tore the ptarmigan from his teeth. He turned on his side and rested, the wonder mounting in his eyes, and the hand which was under slipping slow toward the knife at his hip. But I took it from him, smiling close in his face. Even then he did not understand. So I made to drink from black bottles, and to build high upon the snow a pile of goods, and to live again the things which happened on the night of my marriage. I spoke no word, but he understood. Yet was he unafraid. There was a sneer to his lips, and cold anger, and he gathered new strength with the knowledge. It was not far, but the snow was deep, and he dragged himself very slow. Once he lay so long I turned him over and gazed into his eyes. And sometimes he looked forth, and sometimes death. And when I loosed him he struggled on again. In this way we came to the fire. Unga was at his side on the instant. His lips moved without sound; then he pointed at me, that Unga might understand. And after that he lay in the snow, very still, for a long while. Even now is he there in the snow.

"I said no word till I had cooked the ptarmigan. Then I spoke to her, in her own tongue, which she had not heard in many years. She straightened herself, so, and her eyes were wonder-wide, and she asked who I was, and where I had learned that speech.

"'I am Naass,' I said.

"'You?' she said. 'You?' And she crept close that she might look upon me.

"'Yes,' I answered; 'I am Naass, head man of Akatan, the last of the blood, as you are the last of the blood.'

"And she laughed. By all the things I have seen and the deeds I have done may I never hear such a laugh again. It put the chill to my soul, sitting there in the White Silence, alone with death and this woman who laughed.

"'Come!' I said, for I thought she wandered. 'Eat of the food and let us be gone. It is a far fetch from here to Akatan.'

"But she shoved her face in his yellow mane, and laughed till it seemed the heavens must fall about our ears. I had thought she would be overjoyed at the

sight of me, and eager to go back to the memory of old times, but this seemed a strange form to take.

"'Come!' I cried, taking her strong by the hand. 'The way is long and dark. Let us hurry!'

"'Where?' she asked, sitting up, and ceasing from her strange mirth.

"'To Akatan,' I answered, intent on the light to grow on her face at the thought. But it became like his, with a sneer to the lips, and cold anger.

"'Yes,' she said; 'we will go, hand in hand, to Akatan, you and I. And we will live in the dirty huts, and eat of the fish and oil, and bring forth a spawn—a spawn to be proud of all the days of our life. We will forget the world and be happy, very happy. It is good, most good. Come! Let us hurry. Let us go back to Akatan.'

"And she ran her hand through his yellow hair, and smiled in a way which was not good. And there was no promise in her eyes.

"I SAT silent, and marveled at the strangeness of woman. I went back to the night when he dragged her from me and she screamed and tore at his hair—at his hair which now she played with and would not leave. Then I remembered the price and the long years of waiting; and I gripped her close, and dragged her away as he had done. And she held back, even as on that night, and fought like a she-cat for its whelp. And when the fire was between us and the man, I loosed her, and she sat and listened. And I told her of all that lay between, of all that had happened to me on strange seas, of all that I had done in strange lands; of my weary quest, and the hungry years, and the promise which had been mine from the first. Aye, I told all, even to what had passed that day between the man and me, and in the days yet young. And as I spoke I saw the promise grow in her eyes, full and large like the break of dawn. And I read pity there, the tenderness of woman, the love, the heart and the soul of Unga. And I was a stripling again, for the look was the look of Unga as she ran up the beach, laughing, to the home of her mother. The stern unrest was gone, and the hunger, and the weary waiting. The time was met. I felt the call of her breast, and it seemed there I must pillow my head and forget. She opened her arms to me, and I came against her. Then, sudden, the hate flamed in her eye, her hand was at my hip. And once, twice, she passed the knife.

"'Dog!' she sneered, as she flung me into the snow. 'Swine!' And then she laughed till the silence cracked, and went back to her dead.

"As I say, once she passed the knife, and twice; but she was weak with hunger, and it was not meant that I should die. Yet was I minded to stay in that place, and to close my eyes in the last long sleep with those whose lives had crossed with mine and led my feet on unknown trails. But there lay a debt upon me which would not let me rest.

"And the way was long, the cold bitter, and there was little grub. The Pellys had found no moose, and had robbed my cache. And so had the three white men, but they lay thin and dead in their cabin as I passed. After that I do not remember, till I came here, and found food and fire—much fire."

"But Unga!" cried Prince, the vision still strong upon him.

"Unga? She would not eat of the ptarmigan. She lay with her arms about his neck, her face deep in his yellow hair. I drew the fire close, that she might not feel the frost, but she crept to the other side. And I built a fire there; yet it was little good, for she would not eat. And in this manner they still lie up there in the snow."

"And you?" asked Malemute Kid.

"I do not know; but Akatan is small, and I have little wish to go back and live on the edge of the world. Yet is there small use in life. I can go to Constantine, and he will put irons upon me, and one day they will tie a piece of rope, so, and I will sleep good. Yet—no; I do not know."

"But, Kid," protested Prince, "this is murder!"

"Hush!" commanded Malemute Kid. "There be things greater than our wisdom, beyond our justice. The right and wrong of this we cannot say, and it is not for us to judge."

Naass drew yet closer to the fire. There was a great silence, and in each man's eyes many pictures came and went.

BLIND MAN'S TRAIL

By MICHAEL OBLINGER

Hannegan's Lobstick. Hannegan's Lobstick. **The trail-weary trio well knew the answer: find it and we're rich; miss it and we're doomed.**

IT HAD BEEN a fearsome crossing just at dark with Pascal John paddling bow, Del Hogarth kneeling in the stern, and the dog, Tonk, crouching between them with his nose full of porcupine quills.

As Pascal stumbled out of the long freighting canoe onto the rain-washed beach, muttering, Del heard the river thundering around the spot where Rick Dawn and Bill Hannegan and the girl had smashed up and gone down.

They high-beached the canoe, tugging and straining. Then in the darkness both of them felt for their sleeping bags.

Pascal said, "Well, we made it. But what a cost."

Del didn't answer.

"Yuh don't suppose we ought to track down shore just in case they might o' got washed in?"

Del cleared his throat huskily. "Too dark. We can't see anything."

"Yuh don't figger there was a chance then that—"

"No, not a chance."

Pascal shouldered his bed-roll and went ahead blind, feeling the ground with his feet, sniffing the air for the odor of banksian pine in the hope it would lead them to better shelter, and wood for a fire. Del struck off more to the left following Tonk who would head unerringly for the nearest and best campsite with the same instinct given dogs, wolves, Indians and birds.

Within forty feet, a low-hanging branch snagged Del's hat. The ground had the softness of reindeer moss, and the hard-driving pellets of rain had given over to a disconsolate drip through the dark thatch above him.

Del called to Pascal, "Right here. Fine."

He dropped his bed-roll, got down on his knees and fingered through the moss. He found a handful still dry, a few twigs that crackled to his touch, a piece of bark, a few dead leaves. His lips smiled satisfaction. Making a shield of his body for his precious starter, Del got out a waterproof matchbox, fumbled out a match, then struck its sulphurous head on the corrugated metal side of the box. Deftly cupping the flame, he held his breath and lighted the starter.

"Ready!" he said.

Behind him, Pascal snapped off green tufts of pine and handed them to Del. Del fed one to the starter, yanking back his hand. There was a sudden flare. Tonk jerked his head away, snarling. Del dropped on more pine tufts and now, in their torch light, Pascal gathered dead-fall for the fire. When it was burning well, flaming up through the crib of branches and dry sticks, Del threw one arm around Tonk's powerful neck, held him struggling in the stanchion formed by arm and side, and with his free hand removed ten porcupine quills from the nose and muzzle of the huskie.

"That ought to teach you, damn you," he said.

But he knew it wouldn't. Tonk retired, sulking to the shadows, and Pascal came up dragging a long heavy log. He let it fall.

"This'll do 'til morning," he said.

DEL glanced up at his partner, nodding. Scraggled dark beard, dirt and sweat covered Pascal's face. Long hair covered his ears and neck. He had a wide beaked nose, sharp black eyes and a bulging forehead. One eyelid had been mutilated by a gouging branch two years before, exposing the upper portion of that eyeball and causing the whole eye to stare with a steady, unblinking fierceness. It gave his features a somewhat unbalanced effect.

Del rose and said, "I'll get the grub-box. You sit down, Pack, and have yourself a pipe."

Pascal hunched shoulders and sat down. He blew at a mustache hair tickling his upper lip. He opened his mouth to speak to Del, sighed, and said nothing. Del surmised what he was thinking. He was thinking of tomorrow and the trail. With Hannegan gone, could they find their way? Hannegan alone had been over this confusing system of lakes, streams, hills and dunes that reached off toward the barrens with a thousand fingers. But it was a short-cut to Griscomb Lake—the place where Frank Feter had staked out claims early in the summer before he had returned to Churchill to spread the news, backed up with proof, of a new gold strike richer and more promising than anything turned up yet. A stampede had started from Churchill over the long but better known route up along the western shore of Hudson's Bay, then overland into Keewatin toward Griscomb Lake on Fetter's well-defined mapped-out tracks. The shorter trail northwest overland had not been seriously considered by anyone except Del, Pascal, Rick Dawn and his stepdaughter, Amy. They had heard about it from Revillon's trader, Bert Chance.

It was an old Dogrib trail into the barrens, Chance had told them. Three years before a prospector named Hannegan had accompanied a party of Indians to Churchill from some place on Griscomb River, south of the lake. He was the only white man Chance knew who could guide them there. Maybe they could locate Hannegan on the Nelson River but, of course, that would take time.

Alone, Pascal had chased to York Factory and, by a great stroke of luck, had found Hannegan outfitting for another trip up the Nelson. He had returned with Hannegan in less than a week. They had struck an agreement. In return for guiding them to Griscomb Lake, Hannegan would receive a fourth interest in all the claims staked out, but keeping his own for himself.

It was a hard bargain Hannegan had driven, but better than arriving late with the crowd and taking chances of losing out altogether in the wild scramble for choice places close to Feter's. This way, with any luck at all, they would be nicely located a full week ahead of that stampeding mob.

On his way to the canoe to pick up the grub-box, Del tried to get his mind off Hannegan. To reassure himself, he said, "Everything's okay. We're all right. We'll get there before the others. Sure we will."

But he and Pascal didn't know the trail. Only Hannegan knew it. And now Hannegan—

Del paused, listening. Beating rain and wind. Driftwood crashing along this near-shore current among the rocks. As dark was falling, a plunging log had rammed Hannegan's canoe. From midstream, in their own canoe, he and Pascal had watched the log hurl the thin-skinned bark against a big boulder, crushing it. Then they had heard Amy's agonized scream, seen Hannegan's body flung up on the boulder, where it looked like something pasted there before it slid back senseless into the current and disappeared. And there had been a fleeting glimpse of two heads—two black dots against the spume and swirl of water.

DEL shook his head to shake out the memory. A straggling gleam from the fire fluttered a moth's wing of light upon the curved bow of their freighting canoe. He went forward, dug out the grub-box from under the covering tarp and returned to their camp.

"Looks like it would rain all night," he said.

"It could turn to snow," Pascal said gloomily.

"But it won't freeze yet."

"I don't figger on it."

Del opened the grub-box. Lying on a top spread of oiled cloth were a blackened frying pan, an equally sooted iron pot, a square tin pan, a water bucket, forks, knives, cups, plates and spoons. He laid them all out on the ground near the box and removed the cloth. Five airtight cannisters held flour, sugar, soda, tea and salt. Long strips of pemmican filled in one end of the box. A lidded earthen jar held bear's grease. A cloth bag was filled with dried saskatoon berries. Another bag, larger and bulkier, contained, Del knew, enough meat for several days, if one could call *wapus* meat. He thrust a hand inside the bag and brought out a small skinned carcass and thoughtfully appraised its weight.

"About enough rabbit for supper," he said. "I'll stew it with a stick o' pemmican to give it a different taste."

While Del hacked up the carcass, Pascal took a pot and the water bucket and went down to the river. After supper, Del smoked and thought. Pascal drowsed, face toward the fire, big body hunched but slack.

Finally, he started up and said, "Don't seem right about Amy."

"No."

"She was purty an' young."

"Yes."

"Would o' made a nice little squaw for someone."

"Forget it," Del said. "When we cross the lake tomorrow we'll find the first lob-stick, Hannegan told me."

Pascal picked up a burning branch and stabbed at the heart of the fire.

"Murdering rat! He shouldn't have insisted on that crossing tonight."

"Right," Del said.

"He had the responsibility of this trip," Pascal said, watching the sparks shoot upward. "He knew the trail. We had to depend on him."

Del nodded. "From now on we're on our own," he said. He paused looking straight into Pascal's eyes,. "Unless you want to turn back."

Pascal didn't move a muscle. The big knobby hand holding the branch up in front of him was as fixed as a statue's. The arm, slightly bent, looked stonily rigid.

"Do you?"

"No."

"We got them two lobsticks to go by. One on the lake tomorrow. The other thirty miles on."

"If we can find them," Del said.

A sodden, aching weariness kept Del squirming in his sleeping bag, unable to relax. Pascal snored. Tonk had bedded down on the softest moss with his hot muzzle slightly elevated for the cooling effects of the moist air and occasional spattering of raindrops The charcoal glow from the sudsiding fire cast a curious pallor around.

Wind still whooped in the pines but the rain had diminished. The temperature was falling, Del surmised, a degree or two every hour. It might snow a little before morning, or it might clear; but clear or snow, they could count on the wind to be against them on the long traverse up Big Stony Lake. Might be they would have to lay up most of the day in the lee of some lonely island, watching the smoky white-capped combers.

Tonk raised his head and howled.

"Quiet!" Del warned.

Tonk rose sniffing, the hair bristling along his back.

"Down!" Del said. "It isn't a wolf or he'd o' sung out before. It's likely a porcupine. Tackle another one, blast you—"

Tonk curled an upper lip and held it quivering. Then he flashed a belligerent stare at Del and trotted off. Del sat up. This was a sore point with him. He was damned well disgusted seeing such a smart dog persisting in the crazy belief he could chew hell out of a small dark body armored with needles and pins.

Every day for the last week, Tonk had attacked porcupines and had come off badly. Del was tired of pulling out quills. Tonk's snout was a mass of festering sores. The dog had lost weight, and lately, had been running a fever. Also he had developed an inexplicable stubborn streak, often refusing to obey Del.

"He don't mind yuh no more," Pascal had said once, sarcastically. "Now if he was mine—"

"Experience will teach him."

"Not so quick as a club."

Struggling out of his sleeping-bag, Del reasoned that Pascal was right. Experience hadn't taught Tonk anything. What he needed was a good dressing down. Give a wolf dog an inch, humor him just a little, and he was the master, not you.

Del slipped on his shoepacs. "I'll half kill him," he swore.

H strode to the fire and picked up a hefty branch with a charred end, the same stick Pack had poked savagely into the flames earlier in the evening. Then he straightened from the hips.

"All right, just start in!" he said.

THE rumbling sound Tonk made before he first pitched in was the usual preliminary. That was followed by a series of blood-curdling yelps, snarls and roars.

But this time Tonk merely howled. Del followed along toward the river, calling to the dog. Against his cheeks he could feel the soft flutter of snow, the prickling cold of the wind.

Del threw away his club. "Here, boy!"

Tonk didn't move. As Del stepped in front of him. The Huskie howled again.

In sudden unbelief, Del stooped down. His hand encountered something sleek and wet. He moved the hand along the contours of the body—a woman's body—until it splashed into the water at the river's edge. Then, scarcely realizing what he was doing, he straightened and yelled. The cry struck into the darkness. He was chattering as Pascal came lumbering up.

"What in blistering hell! Have you gone bushed?"

"Amy," Del choked. "I could tell by her hair."

"No!"

"Y-yes."

"How'd you find her?"

"I didn't. It was Tonk."

"Fetch her up to the camp," Pascal proposed a little wildly. "Cripes, I ain't got my shoes on yet. You half scared me to death."

Del got his nerve back, his yammering breath under partial control, raised Amy and followed Pascal. Gently he placed her near the fire and leaped forward excitedly gathering up sticks. He must be crazy. She was drowned. He had only imagined what he had thought he had felt carrying her in his arms—a flutter of life.

He had the fire blazing high by the time Pascal had finished putting on and lacing up his shoepacs.

Then Amy moaned and coughed.

Propped against Del's bed-roll, Amy sipped hot tea. In the light of the fire, Del took out his watch and saw that it was a few minutes past midnight. Working hard, using primitive first-aid, they had revived Amy in about two hours. She was still sick and dazed, sore from being pounded against the rocks, and pretty vague about how she had managed to get ashore. Her shoes and most of her clothes were still steaming near the fire. Her lovely hair had been rubbed dry. She wore a pair of Del's heavy woolen socks, Pascal's rabbitskin vest, and two heavy four-point Hudson's Bay blankets.

All that Del could see of her now was a small face engraved upon folds of wool. The head and forehead were hidden under a fur parka, several sizes too large. She was looking out of wide eyes with enlarged pupils and kept moving her lips.

Pascal put down the cup. "She'll be all right. You an' me'll fix her up for the night an' turn in. Tomorrow we'll figger things out."

Snow fell intermittently during the night. Del blinked eyes at a grey chilly morning, roused up and saw Pascal, fully dressed, trying to coax life into a fizzling fire. Del turned out, glanced at the quiet figure in his own sleeping-bag, and his mouth grew solemn. Barely nodding to Pascal, he went down to the river, carrying the tea pail and water bucket, sliding through white-coated layers of sand and mud and stepping over surface pools and slippery rocks. He washed, combed his hair, filled the containers and returned to their camp. He didn't look at Pascal. When, finally, his gaze did meet his partner's, the expression was evasive. Unconsciously, perhaps, they were trying to avoid each other. A serious crisis caused by Hannegan's death had been complicated further by the events of last night.

What were they going to do about Amy?

Del said in a lowered voice, "There isn't any use putting it off, Pack. I guess you know what I mean."

"We can make it with Amy," Pascal said. His voice was grim.

Del raised his shoulders. "Think so?" he said. "In my opinion the chances are about five to one that we'll never find that trail. Hannegan had trouble himself. We were lost on Echo Lake for two full days. We got off track three times before that. Rivers are full of false channels and lakes are plastered with broken shores opening into long, narrow bays like winding canals. Lay your hands down together with your fingers spread, and you have a map of every lake in this blasted country. These lakes are pieced together with rivers and streams as confusing and numerous as the lakes are. Between here and Fetter's Camp are two lobsticks marking two hidden portages. Anywhere but in this blind-man-bluff a portage has a well-marked portage track. You simply follow it, that's all. Here, on every portage, are fifty portage tracks made over the years by migrating caribou, and only one of them will take you right. You could travel for days, for weeks, on a wrong trail and not be aware of it. Even Hannegan, with all his cocksureness, was mighty baffled at times. Now with more than half of the way still to go, we're taking Amy into that." Del's voice sank to a husky whisper. "A woman!" he said.

PASCAL stared at Del silently, wetting his lips. He held the empty frying pan in one big hand, hunting knife in the other. He knelt in front of the fire, shaggy hair filling in the curving hollows between shoulders and neck.

"So yuh want to go back?"

"It isn't a question of what I want."

Pascal scowled. "It's a question of what she wants, huh?"

"Good God, no." Del spread out his hands in a protesting gesture. "She might want to risk it. More than likely that's what her choice will be."

"Well?"

"Do you want that responsibility, Pack?"

"It's hers as much as our'n."

"No, it isn't."

Pascal stuck the knife in the ground and put the frying pan near the edge of the fire.

"Look," he said. "You don't win nothin' riskin' nothin'. We got the inside track on the boys goin' up to Fetter's new strike. We can drive our stakes right next to his an' cash in big. You an' Amy an' me. We'll be fixed fer life."

"If we were alone," Del said, "I wouldn't hesitate."

"It's even more important now she is with us," Pascal argued. "Her pappy's dead. How's she gona manage without him? Go back an' take a job in some cheap dive stirrin' up drinks an' mulligans fer the likes o' you and me? A good claim near Fetter's would make her independent. Or can't you see?"

"Sure, I can see."

"Then it's settled."

Del set his mouth firmly and turned away. It wasn't settled because he didn't feel right about it. And yet it was settled because he knew that in the human mind decisions were too often made not on a basis of reason but of desire. One did what desire told one to do and endeavored to justify it. Like Pascal, he wanted that gold. Like Pascal, he wanted to share it with Amy. Actually, now that her stepfather was gone and she had no one else to turn to, getting Amy established, so to speak, was even more important than establishing themselves.

With that thought suddenly claiming him, Del returned to the fire and said, "Okay, Pack. It's settled."

"Good fer you," Pascal said.

Across the fire from them, a tangled mass of yellow bright hair rose from jumbled folds of blanket. A serious little face squinted through the breaking shell of sleep like a newly hatched chick. Amy's short quick chirp of amazement brought the partners stiffly erect.

"What—what happened?" Amy asked.

Pascal tugged at his mustache. Del cleared his throat:

"Don't you remember last night?"

"I recall something—"

"That river crossing," Del explained. "You cracked up. You were thrown into the river. Rick and Hannegan—"

He paused. Now she remembered. Terror made her oval eyes so perfectly round they were not like her real eyes at all. The irises were darker, the pupils larger. The chin quivered violently. But not a sound came from Amy. Suddenly, it seemed to Del, no sound came from anywhere, or anything. Sound had transmuted itself into feeling. Feeling had taken on substance and weight.

"Your clothes are warm and dry," Del said, starting to gather them up. "You can dress under the blankets."

Amy thanked him. Pascal made a rumbling noise clearing his throat. Then he held up the tea pail.

"I'm putting in two extra spoonfuls to make it good an' strong. I'll bake you a nice hot bannock, Amy."

Amy thanked him.

Del blew his nose. He got more light sticks for the fire and soon breakfast was ready and Amy had washed and dressed. She wore what she had always worn these last long days on the trail, a pair of woolen slacks, a thick flannel shirt, a fleece-lined jacket with a drop-hood or cowl attached, and gum boots stuffed with bright colored socks. She had combed her hair and fixed it somehow without pins or braids. She looked very pretty but mighty peaked. At breakfast, she didn't smile.

"You better eat good," Pascal said. "You didn't have supper last night. Feel all right?"

"Yes."

"Shaky?"

"Not much."

Pascal looked appealingly at Del. Del said, "We won't stir out today if you don't feel strong enough, Amy."

"I'm ready."

"It's going to be a hard trip."

"I realize that now."

"Maybe you don't feel equal to it," Del blurted. "Maybe you'd rather turn back."

SHE didn't answer. Pascal's scowl told Del that he'd better lay off. Together they scoured the breakfast things with sand, rinsed them in water and put them away in the grub-box. Smiling at Amy, they left her to go in search of Rick's and Hannegan's bodies—which they didn't find—then returned to the canoe. Using tump-lines they packed their stuff two hundred yards along the bank of the river to the shore of a lake, set them down, and went back for the canoe, bed-rolls, grub-box and Amy.

"We're starting out across Big Stony Lake," Del informed her. "It's eighteen or twenty miles long. At the far end, according to Hannegan, we'll find the first logstick marking a blind portage."

"I'm ready," Amy said.

They pushed out from shore. Del paddled stern. In this position he

could see Amy, who had a comfortable place in front of him on a blanket-seat with Del's bed-roll supporting her back. She could recline or sit. Tonk had curled down on some luggage just behind Pascal.

"Well, we're off," Del said.

The lake was shoal and weedy at this end except where the river poured in brawling over sharp-pointed rocks. Up ahead, the view was broken by islands built up on solid rock and covered with lodge-pole pine and white spruce. Like all the other lakes, it had fingered bays with numerous inlets and outlets. To their right the shoreline showed up like the teeth of a comb receding back into a green-tangled blue-hazed obscurity.

Neither Del or Pascal paused except to run their tongues along the paddle blades for a drink of water, or now and then to rearrange their kneeling-pads. Skies were clearing and the sun had come out. The head wind died. Amy had gone to sleep. Tonk sat up hopefully, staring at an approaching island with bloodshot eyes.

Del glanced at the island himself, struck up his paddle and exclaimed, "Holy Hell!"

Pascal broke stroke and growled, "Now what?"

"Pull in," Del instructed excitedly, "Camp—smoke. There's a man there."

Amy sat up, rubbing her eyes. "It isn't possible," she said.

Del and Pascal began paddling hurriedly, heading for a high-sloping beach cluttered with deadfall but obviously the best place to land. The man came down to the extreme edge of the beach, waving and shouting. He had a stocky body and short, thick arms. He wore nondescript clothes, including a dark greasy cap and a pair of Cree moccasins that had shed their ankle-flaps. Twenty feet away, neither Del nor Pascal would have been sure whether he was native or white, had not a thick covering beard proclaimed his origin.

The man chattered and chuckled as they disembarked. He bowed to Amy and shook hands with Del and Pascal. His name was Tim Lowry, he said.

"Come right up to my camp," he babbled. "Folks! White folks! Say—I ain't looked at nothin' human in weeks. I'm from Salt River, if yuh know where that be, an' bound fer out Churchill way." He paused. "You?"

Del answered cautiously, "Griscomb Lake."

Lowry stared. "I heerd of it. But what in tumpit yuh doin' here?"

"On our way to Griscomb," Pascal said.

"No!"

"We sure are," Pascal insisted. "This is Big Stony Lake an' somewhere at its lower end there's a lobstick marking a portage that turns right toward Griscomb."

Lowry shook his head. "This ain't Big Stony Lake."

"To hell it ain't!"

"It's Flickertail Lake."

"Look here," Del cut in swiftly, "you must be mistaken. This is certainly Big Stony Lake."

"Lowry's tongue rolled with embarrassment but he stuck to his guns. "It's yore word ag'in mine," he said, "but I know better."

Pascal seized Lowry by the shoulders and stared fiercely into his eyes. Del stepped back, feeling smothered. His partner's voice fell like the slow measured blows of a man pounding down a location stake:

"If—this—ain't—Big—Stony—Lake—w h e r e—in—d a mnation—is—it?" He dropped his hands. "Where is it?" he snarled.

"East'ard."

"How far?"

"It's to hell an' gone t'other side o' Waku, Tunndra an' Fireweed Lakes."

"Do you know the Churchill-to-Griscomb cross-country trail?"

"I know there be sich a trail."

"An' what the devil is this?"

"This be the route from Salt River to Churchill," Lowry confided. "Hundred miles southeast o' here, it runs into Seal River. You took the wrong turn somewheres." He paused, sampling a fingernail. "Yah, that's what yuh done."

PASCAL sat down on a log and fanned himself with his hat. Del joined him in misery. When Pascal began to swear, his own feelings echoed what his partner said. By the sheer strength and power of words, Pascal drew Hannegan out of his

grave and stood him up like a shivering wretch to be judged and sentenced:

"Death ain't good enough fer you," he snarled. "Hell ain't bad enough. Compared to you, the devil's as sweet an' holy as sugar in the mouth of a saint."

Pascal paused in speechless fury. Then he stood up.

"What we gonna do, Del?"

"Go back. What else is there?"

"I won't."

Del strode over and placed a shaking hand on Pascal's arm. "Look," he said, "we got to think of Amy. There isn't a chance—not one in a million—we can make it now. By the time we go eighty miles back and pick up the trail again—"

Pascal shook off Del's hand. "I ain't goin' back!"

"But how—"

"Why go south to go north again? We kin strike straight northeast, using our compass, an' pick up the right trail to Griscomb."

"We don't know the right trail to Griscomb."

"Then, by God, we'll learn it."

"But Amy—"

Pascal swung toward her. "What about it, girl?"

"I—I don't know," Amy said. "I'm afraid, Pascal. Winter coming on and—and miles and miles to go, no marked trail, little food."

Pascal's snort of derision smothered her voice. He glared at Del. "I thought I had a pardner," he sneered. "You quitter! Hidin' behind a woman's skirts. Ain't got the guts to admit you're scared."

"It isn't that, Pack. It isn't that at all."

Pascal thrust his face close to Del's. "You're a liar!"

Before he realized what he was doing, Del whammed at the face. Pascal whammed at him. Del reeled past Amy, broke off a branch of deadfall behind him and plunged backward into the lake. Pascal staggered and grabbed his jaw. Amy started to cry. Tonk howled. Lowry stared, wiping the back of one hairy hand with the sleeve of his tattered mackinaw.

Pascal faced Del as he came scrambling and dripping up the bank.

"You want more of it?'

"It's finished," Del said. "You can take your bed-roll, the canoe, and go. Amy and I will return to Churchill with Lowry. Is that all right, Lowry?"

"Sure 'tis. I got plenty room."

Del stroked his trouser legs to make the water run out. He was soaked to the waist, cold—cold with anger, cold with resentment deeper than any he had ever known. Pascal had accused him of cowardice and had called him a liar. After eight years together, knowing him, Del, as thoroughly and as intimately as it is possible for one man to know another; knowing him in hardship and hunger, in trial and trouble, he had turned upon him like that.

Del said, "Root and rot, damn you. Get lost. Starve. I don't care what happens. I hope you get all that's coming to you."

He stood wringing out his clothes, not looking at Pascal or Amy. Coward, eh? He had carried that damn lummox, weak with scurvy, out of the bush on his back. He'd fought with him shoulder-to-shoulder. Taken the lead in danger. On two different occasions had saved his life.

To his amazement, Pascal said, "I don't want to part with no hard feelings, Del."

"Go to hell!"

There was a strange breaking silence. Amy came over and put her hand on Del's arm. "Please, Del!"

"Let him go," Del said.

Pascal went. It didn't take him long. Del stared doggedly at the pile of stuff Pascal had heaved out on shore, then he raised his eyes to the big hulking figure alone in their freighting canoe. Sun flashed on the paddle's dripping blade. Light glinted darkly on Pascal's long hair. The hat hung formless and crumpled on the square hard head. Wide shoulders leaned steeply. Arms were moving in slow measured rhythm—

"Good riddance!" Del said.

He and Amy ate lunch with Lowry. Lowry did most of the talking and seemed glad that he was having company all the way to Churchill. Because, he explained, it was his first trip over this trail and it was nice to put in with folks who had just come along it themselves. They would know it like a book. It was a pretty tangled country and mighty confusing even when you'd got sort of acquainted with it. So far he'd been lucky. Every time he'd got lost, he'd managed somehow

to find his way out again. He had been a full month coming from Salt River to here, which was a slow trek by anybody's reckoning, but he had been careful and had taken his time.

"That's the only way," Del said.

THE chunky man talked on. Occasionally Del or Amy answered him. Del was drying his clothes by sitting close to the fire. Sometimes he didn't even hear what Lowry said. Sometimes Lowry repeated what he had said in order to be heard. Sometimes Del was surprised to be pulled back to the fire away from his thoughts. He and Amy had lost their chance forever to stake a rich claim at Griscomb Lake. They had lost their chance to beat the stampede. They had even lost their chance to make a small stake for the long cold winter ahead. Amy would have to work hard to support herself and he would have to work hard at trapping or any odd jobs he could get.

It might be years and years before he could ask Amy to marry him and, by that time, she would likely marry someone else. Anyway, she didn't even know he felt that way about her. He certainly wasn't going to tell her now.

Lowry stopped talking and all Del could hear was the fire crackling. He glanced up and there was Amy sitting on the ground, stroking Tonk's head.

"Where's Lowry?" he asked.

"He's started to load the canoe."

"I'll help him in a minute."

"Del," Amy asked suddenly, "what do you think will happen to Pack?"

"Just about everything."

"Is he apt to get lost and die?"

"Apt to!" Del answered, choking. "He's bound to. Only a fool—I tell you, only a fool—"

"Can't we do something?"

Del nodded slowly. Then in two strides he went around the fire, caught Amy's hand and pulled her to her feet.

"Come on," he said. "I won't let him go being mad at me or me mad at him. We'll borrow Lowry's canoe and try to catch him, Amy. Got to try to talk Pascal out of it. If we can't, we can't. But we've been partners, understand?"

"I know," Amy said.

One after another, they explored the bays seeking some trace of Pascal. He had to enter one or more of these bays looking for a flowing channel and the mouth of a stream that would take him on to the next complicated waterways system and in the general direction he wanted to go. Three of the bays were like dead-end streets and had to be abandoned. The fourth had a creek too shallow and rocky for a canoe. The fifth ended in a swamp. The sixth one proved to be another dead-end but as they turned back, something caught Del's attention.

He shipped his paddle, drew a hand down his sweaty face.

"Hold 'er!" he growled.

"What do you see?" Amy asked.

"A tree."

Amy's voice quavered, "J—just a tree?"

Slowly a look of amazement spread over Del's face. Water dripped from his chin. He started to speak, gulped, dropped the paddle and made a guttural, rasping sound. For several seconds he seemed to be struggling for air and looked like a man who was choking. Then suddenly his eyes cleared.

"It's the lobstick!" he said. "Hannegan's lobstick!"

Amy's eyes widened. "You—you mean that old tree?"

"Yah, that old tree." He pointed excitedly. "Look, Amy. Branches trimmed or lobbed off one side so that the limbs on the other side point toward the portage. It's just as Hannegan described it to me. It marks a quarter-mile overland crossing to Teaspoon Lake. Teaspoon Lake is on the direct route to Griscomb, where we want to go," Del looked past Amy straight into Lowry's puzzled eyes. "You were the one that got off course, not Hannegan," he said accusingly. "This isn't Flickertail Lake, it's the Big Stony. No wonder it took you a full month to—"

"Naw," Lowry gasped, "yuh must be wrong!"

"There's the proof."

Lowry blinked and rolled his tongue. He grabbed his beard with his left hand and pulled. He made a curious clucking sound.

Then he said, "I'll be hanged."

"Thank God!" Amy said.

She was crying. Del was sweating. A wet blur of sweat cut off his view of Lowry, Amy and Tonk. And abruptly all

he could see were glistening rainbow-colored prisms of shiny little specks of brittle stuff like glass. He had to shake his head to get his view clear again. But it was still kind of misty.

He found his paddle and heard his voice: "Sure it's the lobstick. Now let's go after Pack."

PASCAL sat moodily staring into his fire when they found him at twilight on the seventh bay, on the wrong trail, long arms entwined around his knees, his great shaggy mane falling to his shoulders.

He neither spoke nor moved as they came shouting toward him.

"Pascal!" Amy cried. "Pascal!"

He didn't stir. He didn't speak. His beak nose caught the ruddy gleam of the fire. The shapeless no-account hat perched askew on his head like a king's battered crown. To Dell, struggling for something to say and no voice to say it with, the muted darkness crowding in, Pascal seemed unreal. He might dissolve any minute into the ground.

Del heard Amy speak, "Everything is all right, Pascal. We're all going to be together again."

"That's what you think."

"We're going on to Bascomb Lake."

"Not with me."

"Look here," Del said, "you stubborn fool, we've found the lobstick. This isn't Flickertail. It's the Big Stony. We're headed right."

"You say—right?"

"It was Lowry's mistake. Not Hannegan's."

"Than we don't have to—"

"No, we don't."

Pascal raised his shoulders and took in a breath so long and deep the flames sucked toward him. He stood up, legs spraddled, hands on hips. For a moment Del thought the big chest would burst from the strain but the air came out through his teeth with a sound like tearing silk.

"Now what yuh know about that!" he gasped.

"You're not sore at me, Pascal?"

"It wasn't me. It was you."

Del gulped. "It was both of us," he acknowledged. "Both of us, Pack. Too dang stubborn to give in—us two."

Pascal nodded, admitting it. Amy laughed. Lowry came over and shook Pascal's hand.

"It was my mistake that started it," he confessed. "But it was a natural mistake. I really figgered I was on the right track. I could have swore this was Flickertail. Yes, sir, I could have swore—an' I guess I did—that it was you, not me, that had got all twisted."

Next morning, Amy, Del, Pascal and Tonk parted from Lowry and went back to the lobstick marking the portage across sand and eskers to Teaspoon Lake. Three hours packing and tracking across, then loading and going. They paddled for twenty miles, lined the canoe through two rapids on Teaspoon River and settled down on a sandbar for the night.

Two more hours on the river, three more on an unnamed lake, then the second lobstick pointing great haggard branches toward another hidden portage.

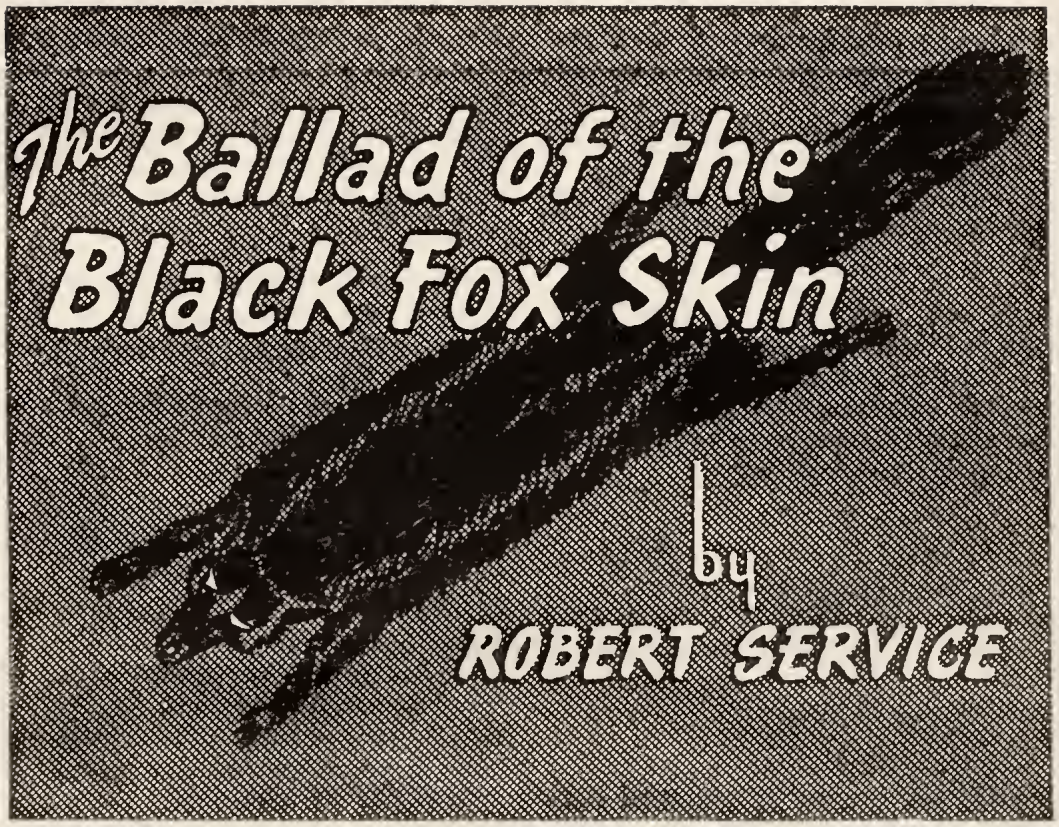
On a cold blustery noon, nine waterways, ten freezing nights and five portages north of Big Stony Lake, the long freighting canoe, scratched and battered from bow to stern, nosed onto a scrabbled wave-lashed beach gritting over sand. High up on a treeless bank stood a sod-roofed cabin with windows of tight-stretched deerskin in place of glass.

"Fetter's," Del said. "We made it. And, by Grumpus, we got here first."

Tonk leaped past him and bounded up the shore. Del tossed out his paddle and followed Tonk. Amy followed Del. Swearing with a sourdough's discriminating taste, and his eye to business, Pascal hunted out picks and shovels and lumbered along behind them.

They found Fetter's workings, traced back six hundred feet, guided by a tilted outcropping strata of rock, then sunk their stakes and took possession. At three o'clock Del turned up color with his pick and, six inches lower, struck the lode itself. It was even better than Fetter had described. It was all and more than they had hoped for.

Del dropped his pick. Cold wind dried the moisture on his face as he grinned at Pack and Amy.



There was claw-fingered Kitty and Windy Ike living the life of shame,
When unto them in the Long, Long Night came the man-who-had-no-name;
Bearing his prize of a black fox pelt, out of the Wild he came.

His cheeks were blanched as the flume-head foam when the brown spring freshets flow;
Deep in their dark, sin-calcined pits were his sombre eyes aglow;
They knew him far for the fitful man who spat forth blood on the snow.

"Did you ever see such a skin?" quoth he; "there's nought in the world so fine—
Such fullness of fur as black as the night, such lustre, such size, such shine;
It's life to a one-lunged man like me; it's London, it's women, it's wine.

"The Moose-hides called it the devil-fox, and swore that no man could kill;
That he who hunted it, soon or late, must surely suffer some ill;
But I laughed at them and their old squaw-tales. Ha! Ha! I'm laughing still.

"For look ye, the skin—it's as smooth as sin, and black as the core of the Pit.
By gun or by trap, whatever the hap, I swore I would capture it;
By star and by star afield and afar, I hunted and would not quit.

"For the devil-fox, it was swift and sly, and it seemed to fleer at me;
I would wake in fright by the camp-fire light hearing its evil glee;
Into my dream its eyes would gleam, and its shadow would I see.

"It sniffed and ran from the ptarmigan I had poisoned to excess;
Unharmed it sped from my wrathful lead ('twas as if I shot by guess);
Yet it came by night in the stark moonlight to mock at my weariness.

"I tracked it up where the mountains hunch like the vertebrae of the world;
I tracked it down to the death-still pits where the avalanche is hurled;
From the glooms to the sacerdotal snows, where the carded clouds are curled.

"From the vastitudes where the world protrudes through clouds like seas upshoaled,
I held its track till it led me back to the land I had left of old—
The land I had looted many moons. I was weary and sick and cold.

"I was sick, soul-sick, of the futile chase, and there and then I swore
The foul fiend fox might scathless go, for I would hunt no more;
Then I rubbed mine eyes in a vast surprise —it stood by my cabin door.

"A rifle raised in the wraith-like gloom, and a vengeful shot that sped;
A howl that would thrill a cream-faced corpse—and the demon fox lay dead...
Yet there was never a sign of wound, and never a drop he bled.

"So that was the end of the great black fox, and here is the prize I've won;
And now for a drink to cheer me up— I've mushed since the early sun;
We'll drink a toast to the sorry ghost of the fox whose race is run."

II

Now Claw-fingered Kitty and Windy Ike, bad as the worst were they;
In their road-house down by the river-trail they waited and watched for prey;
With wine and song they joyed night long, and they slept like swine by day.

For things were done in the Midnight Sun that no tongue will ever tell;
And men there be who walk earth-free, but whose names are writ in hell—
Are writ in flames with the guilty name of Fournier and Labelle.

Put not your trust in a poke of dust would ye sleep the sleep of sin;
For there be those who would rob your clothes ere yet the dawn comes in;
And a prize likewise in a woman's eyes is a peerless black fox skin.

Put your faith in the mountain cat if you lie within his lair;
Trust the fangs of the mother-wolf, and the claws of the lead-ripped bear;
But oh, of the wiles and the gold-tooth smiles of a dance-hall wench beware!

Wherefore it was beyond all laws that lusts of man restrain,
A man drank deep and sank to sleep never to wake again;
And the Yukon swallowed through a hole the cold corpse of the slain.

III

The black fox skin a shadow cast from the roof nigh to the floor;
And sleek it seemed and soft it gleamed, and the woman stroked it o'er;
And the man stood by with a brooding eye, and gnashed his teeth and swore.

When thieves and thugs fall out and fight there's fell arrears to pay;
And soon or late sin meets its fate, and so it fell one day
That Claw-fingered Kitty and Windy Ike fanged up like dogs at bay.

"The skin is mine, all mine," she cried; "I did the deed alone."
"It's share and share with a guilt-yoked pair," he hissed in a pregnant tone;
And so they snarled like malamutes over a mildewed bone.

And so they fought, by fear untaught, till haply it befell
One dawn of day she slipped away to Dawson town to sell
The fruit of sin, this black fox skin that had made their lives a hell.

She slipped away as still he lay, she clutched the wondrous fur;
Her pulses beat, her foot was fleet, her fear was as a spur;
She laughed with glee, she did not see him rise and follow her.

The bluffs uprear and grimly peer far over Dawson town;
They see its lights a blaze o'nights and harshly they look down;
They mock the plan and plot of man with grim, ironic frown.

The trail was steep; 'twas at the time when swiftly sinks the snow;
All honey-combed, the river ice was rotting down below;
The river chafed beneath its rind with many a mighty throe.

And up the swift and oozy drift a woman climbed in fear,
Clutching to her a black fox fur as if she held it dear;
And hard she pressed it to her breast—then Windy Ike drew near.

She made no moan—her heart was stone—she read his smiling face,
And like a dream flashed all her life's dark horror and disgrace;
A moment only—with a snarl he hurled her into space.

She rolled for nigh an hundred feet; she bounded like a ball;
From crag to crag she caromed down through snow and timber fall; . . .
A hole gaped in the river ice; the spray flashed—that was all.

A bird sang for the joy of spring, so piercing sweet and frail;
And blinding bright the land was light in gay and glittering mail;
And with a wondrous black fox skin a man slid down the trail.

IV

A wedge-faced man there was who ran along the river bank,
Who stumbled through each drift and slough, and ever slipped and sank,
And ever cursed his Maker's name, and ever "hooch" he drank.

He travelled like a hunted thing, hard harried, sore distrest ;
The old grandmother moon crept out from her cloud-quilted nest;
The aged mountains mocked at him in their primeval rest.

Grim shadows diapered the snow; the air was strangely mild;
The valley's girth was dumb with mirth, the laughter of the wild;
The still sardonic laughter of an ogre o'er a child.

The river writhed beneath the ice; it groaned like one in pain,
And yawning chasms opened wide, and closed and yawned again;
And sheets of silver heaved on high until they split in twain.

From out the road-house by the trail they saw a man afar
Make for the narrow river-reach where the swift cross-currents are;
Where, frail and worn, the ice is torn and the angry waters jar.

But they did not see him crash and sink into the icy flow;
They did not see him clinging there, gripped by the undertow,
Clawing with bleeding finger-nails at the jagged ice and snow.

They found a note beside the hole where he had stumbled in:
"Here met his fate by evil luck a man who lived in sin,
And to the one who loves me least I leave this black fox skin."

And strange it is; for, though they searched the river all around,
No trace or sign of black fox skin was ever after found;
Though one man said he saw the tread of hoofs *deep in the ground.*

A Condensed Version of a Best-Seller

REINDEER TREK

By ALLEN ROY EVANS

The march of 3,000 living reindeer across the world's bleakest land reads more like the fantastic folk lore of the ancient Norsemen. Yet this momentous journey—fraught with all the perils that a bitter Arctic land can muster—started just before Christmas, 1929. Under the watchful eyes of the Lapp and Eskimo herders, the 2,000-mile trek along the rim of the Arctic Sea turned into a prolonged five-year struggle against unpredictable elements. The incredible endurance, the high courage, and the indomitable will of the men on the trail comprise a saga of the North that may never be equalled.

KULT came rushing up from the lowlands around the Bay. He was carrying something in the crook of his arm. Soak was sitting on a sleigh in front of the tent and he must show her his great discovery. He put it carefully on the sleigh, —an eider-duck's nest with six eggs. Some misinformed duck, wandering far from its habitat, had mistaken the season and at the beginning of an Arctic Winter had attempted to bring forth a family.

At the unexpected treasure Kult and Soak laughed. They were always laughing these days, ever since Soak had come to live in Kult's tent in the exciting Buckland Valley encampment. Kult tossed Soak an egg, shouting as it cracked in her hands. From the other tents the children, Kob and Sik, Lug and Uji, stood in a round-eyed circle, watching. Kult broke an egg; it was almost ready to hatch. Throwing back his head he swallowed rapidly, laughing again. The hard bill of the duckling tickled his throat on the way down. Soak followed his example and the children watched in silent wonder. When the eggs had been disposed of Kult rushed back to the gravel beach and Soak slowly wiped her face with the back of her hand. She was still young and inclined to be dainty.

In the hills back from the shore snow had fallen days ago. It would keep on coming, working its way lower and lower into the valleys. Soak knew that back there the Lapp men, Pehr and Akla and Mikel were doing strange things with reindeer. Soak's brothers and father and grandfathers had hunted reindeer, carrying the precious meat and skins on the dog sleighs. All the Eskimos had done this always, but now the Lapps were patiently teaching the reindeer to pull the sleighs. It seemed all very strange and the country of the Lapps must be a strange country too. Soak had not yet become acquainted with the Lapp women, Waas, who was Pehr's wife, and Neji their sixteen-year-old daughter. There were two young Lapps, little Ata and Jak, but they were too young to be important.

Soak, who now had the status of a married woman, was able to talk freely to the other Eskimo women, Kipi who was Tapik's wife, and even Quag who belonged to Kaas the oldest and wisest Eskimo in the entire camp. They had told Soak many things as they gradually learned them from the men. The husbands attempted to maintain a dignified superiority by a great show of reticence, but they always told their women everything finally. The love of gossip was strong in all the Eskimo race, but the men seemed to have more will power; they withheld their news a little longer.

Although Soak had joined the camp only a few weeks ago when Kult had brought her down to see the strange doings, she already felt that she had much new wisdom. The old chief Kaas was not the head of the en-

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campment, but a great Lapp called Jon who seemed to know everything and direct everybody. He would be leader of the long trek and all must obey him. Soak had watched him from a distance. He had no wife with him, no family, but lived by himself, majestically.

But even the great Jon was not all powerful. Above him, immeasurably superior, were the great White Chiefs. By their cunning thoughts and uncountable wealth the strange trek which they were soon to make, had been planned. Jon himself had lived for many years in that fabulous South country; he knew the language of the White Tribe; he could make strange marks on paper which had meanings to Jon and to the White Chiefs. He did not eat prodigious quantities of whale meat or reindeer or seal, nor did he indulge in those immense orgies of sleep common to the others. Perhaps he had strange kinds of pleasure and indulgences of which Eskimo people knew nothing.

EVERYTHING was strange and exciting and Soak felt that life from now on would be full of new interests. Kaas, the old chief, who was still the recognized head of the Eskimo division of the camp, had conferred with Jon many times. Then Kaas had told Quag and she had passed along the strange news to the other wives. Although the junior wife of the camp, Soak was, nevertheless, proud to belong to the fraternity of wives. She hoped Kult would never take a second wife or trade wives even for a short time. But there was no assurance where the vagaries of men would lead, and anyway, were there not months of excitement ahead?

As they sat scraping reindeer hides Quag had passed on the news from Kaas. Somewhere at an incredible distance in the South was a village of the White Nation. This village was never moved from place to place but remained always on the same spot. There lived the greatest of all the White Chiefs who knew everything. By some mysterious spirit messages they knew of Arctic famine even in the farthest North. The inland Eskimos who suffered most were not of the same family as the White Fathers or even distant relatives, but the wealth of the White Chiefs was so great they could give to all tribes everywhere.

The caribou herds had become fickle; sometimes they migrated along the same old valleys and ranges, sometimes they did not come at all. Hunger and cold grasped the Northland in a death grip when the caribou failed. Now the all-powerful White Fathers had caused to be gathered a vast herd of the finest reindeer in all the world. This was the incredible present to be given to those distant Eskimo tribes far away to the East along the banks of the Great River, wide and mighty as the sea.

Then the Lapps had come. Although they seemed haughty and inclined to stay by themselves, Soak could see they were a people much like herself. In small ways they might be a little like the White Nation but without their great wealth and magic. But the Lapps had power over reindeer. They could make them draw sleighs like dogs. They kept them in herds, driving them from place to place, so that they always knew where to find them. Some of the reindeer were so tame the Lapps could touch them, taking away from them their milk. They could do this day after day although the reindeer must have known what they were up to. It was all very wonderful.

The time for the long trek was almost at hand. When the heavy frosts sealed the streams and marshes and treacherous muskegs they would move Eastward. But they must have snow too. The sleighs would be heavy with skins and tents and all the strange food the White Chiefs had supplied.

"Soak! Soak!" It was Kult coming again. He would expect food to be ready,—boiled seal, no doubt. He would be hungry of course. Men always seemed to be hungry. Soak sighed like a wife of long experience and ran inside. Life had its duties as well as its day-dreams.

Grand surprise! Soak need not work tonight. Tapik had sent word to the other Eskimo tents that boiled seal would be served to all, perhaps dried reindeer tongue or walrus blubber cut in long strips. Kipi, Tapik's wife, had once belonged to Advark, a Coast Eskimo, and she had been on board one of the great ships of the White Chiefs. She had tasted biscuit and sugar and talked about the most interesting things. Soak often wondered how Kipi had become Tapik's wife. Perhaps there had been a quarrel and a battle although Tapik seemed like a quiet man. Still one never could tell

about men; at least Soak couldn't and she doubted if any other woman could.

Now they were at Tapik's tent and all the others were too. The lamps were burning and the seal pot bubbling and the tent seemed overflowing with men and women and children. Even the dogs kept crowding in; although they were kicked out constantly they came back just the same. What a fine thing to be among people and hear them talk! Soak smiled at Kob, Quag's youngest son, a fine boy of twelve. And Kipi's family, Sik, Lug, and Uji, of lesser ages, were there too, pushing and pinching each other quietly so that their grave fathers would not notice them.

At last Tapik lifted the meat from the pot, spearing it with a sharp-pointed rib bone. He passed it to Kaas, the ancient chief, who took an enormous mouthful of hot, dripping meat. He could not bite it off, but with a dull knife sawed back and forth close to his lips until he had severed the mouthful. He passed the main portion on to Kult who took his bite and went through the same cutting process. And so the piece went round and when it was done other hot masses were lifted from the pot and passed endlessly. It was not a time for talk; eating was a serious business, even more serious than sleeping.

WHEN no one could possibly swallow another morsel the meal was ended. Whatever satisfaction might have shone from each round face was hidden by the combination of straggling hair and grease-smears effectively masking any possibility of facial expression. No one thought of tea, that wonderful drink, which the White Chiefs' ships had brought some years before. All waited, filled and satisfied, until Kaas began:

"In the tent of Akla, the Lapp, I have been. There is heard many things." The face of Kaas was seamed by a thousand blizzards and his hands trembled like a tent flap. He was still their chief and they listened.

"To Jon, the Lonely One, has come much strange food from the White Chiefs. They have a strong drink,—coffee, more powerful than tea. In the store-house are many boxes of biscuits, of sugar, of flour, and strange foods without name. Jon is the keeper of these and of many other things of great worth." All marvelled at the unthinkable riches of the White Chiefs and their cunning in the making of foods that kept always the same in Summer or Winter.

"The food of the White Chiefs and many iron knives and pots and cans go with us soon on the long trek." The thought of sharing in such wealth, of tasting unknown and dainty foods from a far country stimulated the listeners.

"Tonight snow comes and soon much cold. Tapik and Kult will walk on the skis of the Lapp country. There will be much labor with reindeer. Jon, the Lonely One, has said it." Under the solemn statements of Kaas, the long trek with the great herd took on less and less the aspect of a gay frolic. It became portentous, epic, almost a command of the Mountain Spirits. The unknown country to be travelled in the uncertain twilight of Winter had the possibilities of menace. They felt like children about to ascend a dark and unfamiliar stairway.

In the night clouds, which for days had veiled the tops of the high hills, came down over the lowlands. Soft snow covered the familiar outlines of Buckland Valley. Enormous flakes floated endlessly out of the fuzzy air, covering the vast tundras for the long Winter sleep. All day the snow fell and by the second morning a stiff crust had formed. Slow, resistless, implacable, the universal blanket would steadily become thicker, heavier, smothering, in its enfolding grasp.

It was a day of activity. The reindeer were coming into the valley,—three thousand perfect animals, sound and fit for the long trek. Under Jon's direction Pehr and Akla and Mikel were slowly shifting the great herd to the lower levels. They were sturdy Lapps, wise with generations of reindeer lore. Trained from childhood, they had come across half the world, bringing that peculiar talent for domesticating the still wild and timid deer. With an endurance almost incredible for men of small stature and a patience almost superhuman, they had labored daily.

Now Jon himself watched the slow drifting of the herd across the new snow. There was a deep thoughtfulness on his red-tanned face. On him alone rested tremendous responsibility; he had powers of a dictator over his subjects. In some mysteri-

ous way the great White Chiefs had heard of him, had found him and persuaded him to come from his retirement for one more battle in the North. For three score years he had matched strength and skill against Arctic perils. He had retired, an unbeaten warrior; now he had been asked to "come back."

Here in the camp he had lived alone, silent, planning, watchful, untroubled by the gossip of common men. A trek of almost two thousand miles across unknown wastes, through Polar night,—that was his problem. On his decisions would rest the lives of his herders and their families. His decisions, too, would determine the loss or safety of that mighty herd of precious animals entrusted to his care by the great White Chiefs of the Government.

Now as he watched Pehr and Akla and Mikel skilfully directing the movement of the herd, he remembered how carefully he had chosen them. Their strong points and their faults he had slowly weighed. Pehr was invaluable, without an equal in patience and experience, wise in all that pertained to the management of reindeer. A long time Pehr had considered before coming with Jon. Then it must be that Waas, his wife, come also. She had always travelled with him, a wonderful cook, strong and brave. Neji, oldest daughter, mature and womanly at sixteen, skilful in the sewing of skins, she, too, would be needed. Ata of eight and five-year Jak must accompany their mother. So Pehr had brought them all. Jon was thoughtful about this.

Jon had also chosen Akla the hunter. From Akla wolves rarely escaped. The glutton wolverines were out-guessed by him and he was also the only hunter to slay three bears in one season. The precious reindeer would need his cunning protection.

Mikel, of twenty only, was wiser than his years and still with the swiftness of youth. On his skis, like the speed of the wind, he could circle the reindeer herd in half the time it seemed possible.

Thus Jon had selected the several abilities necessary for the long trek. And the men were honest; they were good men. Jon turned his gaze from the advancing herd toward the beach. There the Eskimo had pitched camp. Jon was less sure of the Eskimo. Perhaps they were good people too; the White Chiefs had thought so. The Chiefs said the Eskimo were necessary, they knew the country, they knew the language; roving bands of their kindred might be met who would almost certainly attack the herd. Then, too, Eskimo must learn the management of the herd, the conservation of reindeer throughout all time, the rearing of other herds, protection, forethought, patience. To teach them was a problem second only to the long trek itself.

THOSE distant Eskimo tribes on the other side of the Great River on whose care the prosperity of the precious animals would depend,—how about them? They, too, must be taught,—a long lesson,—explanations,—patience,—restraint. Eskimo were naturally destructive, like children, careless of the future. With only their own primitive weapons this wantonness had not been of great moment. But the rifles of the White Chiefs slowly increased in the Northland. How easy to bring down a whole herd of pawing musk-ox! What rare sport to drop caribou after caribou! So many sometimes that only the tongues need be taken. Now the great herds were dwindling; they avoided the ancient migratory trails. Hunger and cold, stark and terrible, brooded over the Arctic night.

Jon sped up the Valley to inspect the oncoming herd. He must have those Eskimo, Tapik and Kult, practise more on their new skis; they were not yet quite swift enough for herders. Concerning the old chief Kaas it did not matter; he could not be asked to take his turn with the others. He must be very old but his influence was still great; as a contact man between the Lapp and Eskimo herders he would be valuable. It was difficult to decide about the Eskimo families but Jon knew the men would be unhappy without their wives and children. They become moody and quarrelsome and inclined to desert,—yes, they must all be taken. Their little company, then, would be eight Lapps and ten Eskimos,—men, women and children. Some would leave, others might join along the way; Jon wondered how many of the original eighteen would be left to cross the Great River. He could scarcely hope that all would reach the journey's end.

As Jon reached the top of a small rise he paused. The reindeer were slowly flow-

ing into the Valley below him. Jon had never seen a herd in such fine condition, large, picked animals, strong and fat; six hundred bulls with great branching antlers and twenty-four hundred cows with lesser head-gear. Only the wealthiest Lapps, through generations of inheritance, possessed herds such as this.

The bulls were usually in the lead and at the outer fringes along the flanks of the herd. They tossed their heads with a new briskness, now that colder weather had come. They stamped, they pawed the thin snow, they snatched bites as they went. Sometimes obstreperous animals squared about and clashed antlers in a trial of strength only to be surrounded and carried along by the numbers behind. A sea of grey backs moved along, close-packed; tossing antlers like masses of brush wood on the crest of a flood flowed through the narrow pass. As Jon watched the passing of the splendid animals he was thrilled again by the familiar sight.

Behind the reindeer came the herders, gliding almost without effort on their long skis. Slowly and avoiding sudden motion, they manoeuvred the animals forward. The old dogs, Lapp trained, watched the right and left flanks of the herd, running forward, squatting or running up again as the need arose. Pehr assumed the center position; he was leader of field operations when Jon was absent. He lifted right arm, left arm, right arm, as he carefully directed operations on either side. Jon relied on Pehr; he was second in command.

Now that the herd had come down from the hills it could be guarded with less effort. All Summer the herders had lived in the hills. Daily they labored with a small, selected number of the finest males. These animals had been partially trained before, but they were restive, timid, subject to sudden fright.

THE natural wariness of generations seemed almost impossible to overcome. The herders approached them quietly, singling out the domesticated from the others. The men walked slowly within thirty feet, sometimes twenty feet of their chosen animals. With short lassoes the deer were secured. Some waited quietly the approach of the herder; others struggled wildly, plunging and rushing and dragging the herders long distances before allowing themselves to be taken.

Patiently, without anger, without ill-treatment, the process went on, over and over again, many times in a day. Even the wiry herders were exhausted by nightfall. But the reindeer must become "drivers"; they must haul the heavy sleighs over the vast snow-covered plains. They must lose their man-fear and become an unwilling part in the age-long conquest. To their posthumous value they must also add a living service.

The training was now in its final stages. Tents and tools were ready. Tanned hides and sleeping bags and kaptas were in order. Varieties of food, dried and canned, cured and frozen, fresh and aged, were stored in great quantities. Knives and pots and needles were located for hurried packing. The snow covering deepened and the nights were colder. When the lakes and streams and treacherous muskegs were hard with frost then would come the day of departure. Then the children of The North would drift silently into the dimness of the long trek. Polar twilight would envelop them; haze of storm demons would swallow them. Never such courage, such wildness, such premeditated recklessness, such sublime faith!

Only a few days more were needed now.

II

THERE had been sharp frosts and light snow falls and a gradual darkening of the days. It was a period of hiatus between brief, bright Summer and the heavy hand of Winter. Then the first real storm roared out of Buckland Bay and up the whole length of the valley. First a wall of white impenetrable haze travelled inland. Then followed the wind, not gradually rising, but shrieking with full force from the first moment. It had come in the early morning and all were yet in camp. The dogs crowded into the tents and were allowed to stay. The tents quivered and strained as the gale made strange, whistling noises in the top ends of the tent poles. Never for an instant did the roaring die away; before each hurtling blast could end it was swallowed by a next and stronger fury. As if to compensate for the brief Summer loss of his kingdom the Old Man of the North reclaimed

it now with double vigor. The sea was not yet frozen and sounded a strange, deep under-tone to the shrill storm noises.

Jon took the first watch,—a full twenty-four hours. With three dogs he slowly circled the herd, and circled again and again, endlessly, tirelessly. The reindeer faced the storm as always, heads lowered. They moved little unless startled; sometimes they shifted slightly as if to take a firmer stand against the wind. It was cold but not yet the killing cold of midwinter. As Jon made his round at the end of his watch Pehr was waiting for him at the edge of the herd where he knew Jon must pass. Jon gave the signal of "all's well" and vanished with his dogs. Pehr had brought three fresh dogs with him.

In his turn Akla came, the third to take the watch. Then just before Mikel's turn the storm passed, almost as instantly as it had come.

Tapik and Kult pushed from their tents into the cold outside. They felt a new keenness in the air. There was no wind after the storm, only a clear, intense cold that pierced the marrow in a new way. It had been cold before, but this was a different cold, intense and relentless. It was the cold of Polar night in an almost visible grip over the land. Long, bony fingers of ice settled in a convulsive clutch over streams and lakes and tightening muskegs. Tapik and Kult danced about a few minutes on the new, hard snow, then sought their tents again.

Jon had examined the ice and the swamps, now of rock-like hardness. Then the word had gone out,—they would start tomorrow!

IN the morning came a frenzy of activity. All had been in readiness for days; there remained but the final packing, the lashing of loads to sleds, the harnessing of deer and dogs. Jon had decided to travel only short distances at first until all, both men and animals, became accustomed to the trail. He had, several days before, located the site of the first camping place.

Jon watched the Eskimos start first with the dog teams. The dogs were fat and broad-backed. Jon had seen other dog teams; he remembered how much they had resembled these dogs; he remembered, too, their changed appearance at the end of the Winter. The reindeer were harnessed next, restless and eager. They were filled with the strength of months of good feeding. Like horses at the barrier they left in a whirl of speed. Soon they passed from sight over the first crest of Eastern hills. The old camp was strangely silent and desolate. The first storm would cover tracks and débris; the place would blend indistinguishably into one endless waste of bleakness.

Jon looked to the East. The reindeer were moving up and over the first range of hills. Soon he would be the only bit of life left in the great valley; like the captain of a ship he would wait until all had gone. The deer moved slowly; they were not yet accustomed to being herded. With almost human intelligence the dogs would be working, Jon knew, although he could not see them against the snow background. Today the herd was under Pehr's direction. Already, foot by foot, they moved nearer that far goal on the other side of the Great River. Jon was glad even for a start; no longer would the trek be all ahead of him.

How familiar the great, sweeping contours of the Valley had become! Jon thought he could find his way here even in the thickest storm. The White Chiefs had told him of the land reserved for reindeer. But what lay between, Jon did not know; not even the White Chiefs knew. They had told him to keep as close as possible to the Arctic Sea. That was all anybody knew. No one had gone that way before; at least no one who had been able to tell of it afterwards: It was a fearsome road where storm demons rushing in from the sea met other storm demons coming down from the mountains. Over this battlefield of giants dwarf men must pick their perilous way.

III

ON CLEAR days they saw the sun. Not the bright, friendly sun of Summer, but a sun infinitely remote, pale and weak; a sun that looked at them briefly and then, weary with so much effort, dropped from sight almost at once. The Sightless Spirit who ruled the night was always warring against the sun, driving it back from the Kingdom of the North. When the dark Spirit won the long struggle the sun would disappear, sick and beaten. Only after a long night of convalescence could the sun

Some season, they said, there would be a appear again ready for the age-old battle. fight to the finish and either the Sightless Spirit or the sun would never come again. Through the long darkness of Winter there was always the secret dread that the sun had yielded forever. What a joy to see the golden rim again! How exciting to watch the renewed sun come back, strong and shining, for its Spring battle! The Eskimos were always on the side of the sun, longing for its permanent victory. But now, day by day, the dark Spirit battered the sun lower and lower down behind the distant mountains. It was a time of apprehension.

Jon's people had camped and travelled and camped again many times. Sometimes they were near the sea, but often they were forced far inland when the coast mountains became impassable. At such times as they were near the sea Tapik and Kult hunted seal. Although there was still no lack of food carried on the sleds, the Eskimos had a great longing for fresh seal meat. They were always eager to find any excuse for using their wonderful rifles. Tapik and Kult had owned rifles for several years, trading for them an enormous number of fox skins. But back in the inland country rifles were almost unknown; some of the old Chiefs still refused to allow the White Man's magic to be used. Tapik and Kult felt very superior to those benighted ones in the hills.

Now they crept out, ghost-like in the grey twilight, on and on over the endless ice field. They searched for air holes. Near the holes they must wait with long patience. Often no seal came even after the longest waiting but sometimes a sleek, black head looked about warily. It took much self-control, especially for Kult, not to fire too soon. The seal must come all the way out of the air hole, and even a little distance away. Often when hit, the animals by a single lurch could flop back into the holes again and be lost. But if they were allowed to move away it was possible, after firing, to rush up and head off their retreat.

If there happened to be a little sun at mid-day the seals might be already on the ice basking for a brief moment in the feeble rays. Then it became necessary to approach with infinite caution. If there were ice hummocks to hide behind it was better. Tapik could drop flat and, imitating the peculiar motions of tail and flippers, work himself forward almost into the midst of the unsuspecting seals. Then he would fire and how he enjoyed the sudden confusion of the seals! They seemed to have such surprised looks he could not help laughing at them. Sometimes he would get two at once; when they were at a distance from open water, he took three.

Kult, although younger and swifter, was not a good hunter. He had little patience; he did not like the long discomfort of waiting on the cold ice. Often his foolish capers frightened the seals just as they began to come out. Tapik could hardly be patient with him and sometimes went off at a distance to work by himself. If Tapik took two seals, Kult would drag one into camp pretending that he had made the kill himself. Kult liked to boast before the women in the igloos. No end of exertion could be too great for him if he had an audience, but he shirked the lonely vigils in the cold wind. It was possible that Kaas would hear of Kult's deficiencies. Kaas seemed to hear all gossip, but he said little.

Today the seals did not seem to need the air. Tapik and Kult watched and waited by all the likely places but not a single black head showed itself.

The ice stretched everywhere without limit. There was no line where it seemed to meet the sky, only an indefinite vague blending with no beyond. Over the vast field there were uncountable upheavals. Fantastic walls and ridges and mighty blocks were heaped in confusion like the ruins of a city of marble. Tapik and Kult went on, walking around the high hummocks or climbing over the slabs where they had buckled into long ridges. Then they came to a narrow strip of open water, so narrow they could leap across. They were tired and propped themselves against the side of a tall ice mass to watch the water for signs of life. Seal meat, raw and warm, would be very welcome.

But nothing came and now they must go back. Then around a corner of the hummock moved a white monster, almost indistinguishable in the grey light. Tapik who was farthest away saw it first and fired. There could be time for but one shot and Tapik knew that the Great White One was not often killed by a single shot. Kult who was almost within reach of the bear was so

startled he could not think what to do. With a convulsive leap he began to climb the steep hummock. His speed was too great for caution and in an instant he lost his footing. Slithering and grasping he slid down the side, plunging into the open water at the bottom.

TAPIK drew his long sealing knife. He must avoid the wounded animal as long as possible, giving it every chance to weaken. The great, awkward bulk of his enemy was surprisingly swift. It seemed uncertain whether to attack him or go after the thing that had splashed into the water. There were red blotches on the ice and Tapik felt he had made a vital shot. If he could keep away from it long enough, it might bleed to death; he must avoid even a single sweep of those long, raking claws. Just as the bear reached the edge of the water Tapik gave a great shout. The animal turned uncertainly and then made towards him. Tapik darted behind the hummock. There stood Kult's rifle just as he left it. Tapik grasped it and, waiting as long as he dared, fired again. The monster dropped on all fours and began a kind of circling movement. It roared terribly as its front legs gave beneath it and its head touched the ice. Even then it kept pushing itself forward by its mighty haunches; but Tapik knew it would never rise again.

He rushed to the ice edge where Kult clung, chattering and miserable. Without a hold he could not lift himself out but waited, with arms spread on the smooth ice. Tapik nicked a hole for his heel and grasping Kult's wrists gave a great heave. Kult came, dripping and slushing, over the top.

When they came to the bear it no longer moved. Its muzzle rested on its front paws almost as if it had been asleep waiting for the time when seals would come to open water again. It must be skinned. Bear hides were not common; they could use it. It would not take long with sharp iron knives. Tapik remembered when he had used the old bone knives, thick and dull. Then skinning had been a real problem, but not now. Kult was now a willing worker; he jumped about with many unnecessary motions trying to bring back for himself a little warmth. When the skin was free they took the tongue and the heart and some of the best fat cuts and rolled them in the hide with the fur inside. So arranged the whole weight could be hauled over the ice like a sled. They turned homeward. The mountains on shore were a little higher and darker than the hills of ice around them.

When Kult reached his igloo it was very late but Soak had the pot boiling for him.

"Did you get two seals that you should be so long away?" Soak hoped that he really had brought something. The gossip that Kult would not hunt reflected on her as the wife of an incompetent.

"No seals." Kult was brief and gruff. Somehow he felt that Soak did not respect him as husbands should be respected. He must not be too friendly and forgiving.

"No seals! No seals!" Soak repeated. "But Tapik—how many for Tapik, then?"

"No seals. When no seals come from the water what hunter can take them?" It was final. If Tapik had none, how should he, Kult, have one!

Soak knew there was something he did not tell her. She did not know whether Kult hoped she would question him as he generally hoped, or if he now merely tried to imitate the silence and wisdom of an old Chief like Kaas.

"When we no more go on the trail with Lapps who have White Chief's food how can we live without seal meat?" Soak often wondered how they would manage when the reindeer trek was over.

"A great hunter does not trouble with seals only." To restore his importance Kult must tell of the mighty bear. But he was not sure just how much of the story Tapik might relate. Tapik did not talk much; he had often allowed Kult to claim undeserved credit for seals. It was a delicate problem. Even if Kult did not take the entire glory at least he could claim a part. Besides Soak had noticed that he had been wet. She was only waiting her time to ask about that too. Well, he would tell her.

"It is only a bear that is brought back." Kult affected a great unconcern as he had noticed in the older hunters.

Soak looked at him in silence; she knew that Kult had never before taken a bear. Still he might yet become a real hunter.

"We will eat of it in the morning," said Kult, seeing her doubt. "That Great White One will not again drive the seals from my rifle." Once Kult was launched he could not stop. "Tapik was with me. After much

walking we came to open water to wait for seals. The seals would not come while the White Bear swam in the water. Pieces of ice were thrown at him but he would not go away. A great anger came to me and I leaped into the water with the long iron knife. The White Bear saw my sudden anger and would have escaped me, but I swam after it, sinking the long knife many times into his shoulders. See, I am very wet."

In the Eskimo igloos next night pots of bear meat boiled. It was like the old times to have strong bear meat once again. The dainty food of the White Chiefs was wonderful to the taste, but real strength came only with time-tried food. When the feast of the bear was over, old tales of prowess were told. The tales had been told many times and they would be told many times again. Tales of truth mingled with the legendary exploits of ancient heroes. Spirits of men, demons and animals, mingled weirdly in the dim struggles of far-off days.

It was rumored that Tapik could not find the heart of the bear. Searching among the frozen cuts of meat wrapped in the bear skin, he could not find it. Perhaps it had been lost on the rough road across the ice hummocks. Then from the tent of Pehr, the Lapp, came the whisper. A gift had been left—the heart of a bear. It was odd, Kult had brought it.

THE gossip passed from tent to tent and from igloo to igloo. Kult had left a gift in another tent where no relative lived. There could be but one meaning. It was very strange. Kult had been married to Soak so short a time and Soak was still very young. In Pehr's tent was Neji, the sixteen-year-old daughter of Pehr and Waas. But Neji was a stranger, a Lapp and of another race. Only the older men of prowess and property had two wives, an old wife and a young one. It was indeed strange.

When Soak heard the talk from the women she went to her own igloo. She was very angry and she was sad too. She lay on her pile of skins and covered her head so that she might think. She had been shamed before them all, she who had been so proud to be the youngest of all the wives. It was something she could not understand. How could Kult do such a thing? Kult, the loafer, who did not bring back enough from the hunt to keep one wife. Already he had made her ashamed by his laziness.

IV

PROGRESS was slow. It seemed to Jon that some perverse spirit frustrated every move.

When the herd moved easily some accident delayed the sleds. When the teams worked without a mishap, then part of the herd would make a swift and startled detour; it took a long time to get them all together. It seemed impossible to have everything ready at the same time. And yet there was a forward movement, slow and vexatious as it might be, they still moved Eastward.

Now they felt the full anger of Winter. Dark storms rushed inland from the great sea—breathless and blinding. On clear nights the stars mocked them with cold and bitter derision. They moved like atoms in the midst of cosmic upheavals, ever expecting to be crushed and ever escaping.

When they came down from a range of foot-hills an immense level valley spread before them. It was so level it must be a frozen arm of the sea or the wide mouth of a river. Jon could not determine what it was. With the whole country buried in snow and the air so often filled with haze or swirling storms it was difficult to understand the nature of the unfamiliar country. But this great level floor would be an excellent place for travel; here they could make up for past delays. When they reached the level the men pushed their testing sticks through the snow. Yes, undoubtedly they stood on a wide plain of snow-covered ice. To the South a haze made it impossible to know if the valley continued inland taking on the contours of a river. But they judged that it must be a river; the familiar hummocks of sea ice were nowhere to be seen.

Jon hesitated, he did not know why. The others were eager to speed over the smooth valley after the rough going in the hills. Finally Jon gave the word and they were off. With what ease they went! The thin snow over the ice made a perfect surface for swift traveling. This time the teams and sleds were ahead of the reindeer herd. Far before them, rising from the level floor they could see a cluster of small hills. Doubtless

an island in the mouth of this mighty river. On this island they would camp and the next day travel swiftly on to the farther shore. Hills, no matter how low, always gave some shelter. A fine camping place just made for them! At last they seemed to be having a little luck.

When the sleds had set off toward the distant island the reindeer were brought down to the snow-covered ice. The animals drew back, milling about on the bank. They needed urging. Then some of the foremost deer seemed to catch sight of the distant sleds and timidly they began to follow. Soon the whole herd was streaming across the vast snow floor. Jon noticed how restless they continued. Small groups of deer suddenly ran back over the trail or darted to right or left. The small detachments were slowly persuaded to join the main herd again. They were sensitive. Perhaps a storm was gathering. Over this immense floor the wind would be terrific. Jon looked anxiously towards the distant island.

Long before the reindeer reached the island, camp had been made. The island was larger than it had appeared from the shore. In small depressions the Lapps had reared their "vadmal" tents and the igloos, too, were almost finished, although it was curiously difficult to find snow deep enough for the igloo blocks. When the reindeer reached the island they sprang up the slope; they seemed eager to leave the level floor of snow-covered ice. At once they began to paw away the snow, but soon all pawing stopped. Jon examined the holes they had made; no moss beneath the strangely thin layer of snow, only hard rock everywhere. The deer had had good pasture for three days and would not suffer greatly and tomorrow, by noon, they would finish crossing to the Eastern shore.

IT was a clear night of stars. A sharp breeze passed over the level snow and it was good to crawl inside of tent and igloo. There had been no upsets that day, no accidents or delays. They were not so tired as usual and there was a feeling of contentment because of the distance traveled. Waas made large cuts of reindeer meat while Neji boiled the coffee. Over in the igloos seal strips bubbled in the pots. There would be hot tea and maybe tobacco. Tapik and Kult felt almost a kinship to the White Chiefs since learning so thoroughly to use their gifts. The day's work was done, there was enough to eat, they were content.

But Jon, the Solitary One, was not content. He was not at ease and he did not know why. The high, rocky walls on each bank of this great river or bay, or whatever it might be, gave him a sinister feeling of imprisonment. The reindeer, too, had been uncertain; they had been unwilling to cross the level floor. Jon would be glad to reach open country again; tomorrow his apprehensions would be forgotten.

In the igloo of Kaas and Quag all had been quiet a long time. Then Kaas, the old Chief, stirred restlessly.

"In this place are spirits. The mountain spirits crowd into the hills." His voice was strange and solemn. Quag, beside him in the darkness, did not know if he woke or slept. She made vague, comforting sounds and lay very still. But Kaas went on:

"The Black Ones from the sea are gathering. They strive against their mountain

foes. The field of battle we rest on." Kaas drowsed into silence. His voice, of late, had been little heeded in counsel. Now the young men thought only of White Chiefs; even the Lapps usurped his old authority.

Jon was still awake. He unfastened the flap and stepped out. The wind was rising; he could feel the hard snow sifting along the surface. Leaning against the wind, Jon made his way to the South side of the island. The deer were quiet, all facing the wind, motionless like statues of deer. Tapik and a dog were with them. Jon went back.

Still the wind blew. After midnight its speed became terrific. The tents strained seaward and spare poles were suddenly propped on the North side of all the tents. It was hard to know when morning came. The sifting snow had now been lifted and filled the air with its rushing frenzy. The snow had a wild longing for the great sea which it could not seem to reach fast enough. A greyness, which hardly seemed to have any light, filtered through the rushing air.

Jon listened in his tent. This was not the usual storm gale, not a succession of mighty blasts with intermissions between. The valley was a a vast funnel through which the gathered mountain winds poured themselves out to sea. It was a river of wind never ceasing for an instant; no varying voices, only that single roaring note.

It was time to go, time to struggle from the path of this terrible out-pouring of the hills. Jon could hardly stand. He thought of creeping to Pehr's tent; then he noticed the snow had gone. The rocks were bare and rough; the snow was gone from even the crevices between the rocks. This had never happened before. Jon struggled to the igloos. Kaas and Quag, Tapik and Kult and all the others huddled behind thin snow walls. The igloos had been eaten away; only the bottom parts of the walls were left and every moment spurting smokes of snow left the remains lower and lower.

Jon struggled to the South side of the island. No time must be lost in moving from the path of this pitiless torrent of wind. He knew that not far Eastward loomed the shelter of great shadowy hills. Then Jon came among the reindeer. He could see hundreds and hundreds of them, close together, all braced against the terrible rush of wind. They must be moved at once from these barren rocks to their moss pasture on the mainland.

They were all ready, the trusty Pehr, and Akla and Mikel.

Now as they struggled toward the reindeer a strange thing happened. Almost at once there was no more wind. Like water poured from a kettle, the supply of wind was suddenly ended. The men looked at each other in amazement, then they looked seaward. They could still hear the rush of air; they could see the storm swirls rushing out over the endless, frozen sea. Then the last mutterings rolled away.

Their voices gave an odd, hollow effect in the thin, still air as they made on down to the reindeer. The animals were looking across at the vague outlines of mainland hills where pasture might lie. Between stretched a smooth floor of ice swept free of all snow and polished by the mighty wind. The reindeer were stiff from the long immobility in the storm; they stamped the rocks and stretched hind legs in a limbering

process. They tossed their heads in short, impatient movements at the continued lack of moss.

THE deer on the lower edge of the herd made cautious, experimental trials of the ice and drew back again to the rocks. Then the milling of the great herd as they crowded down the slope forced the nearest reindeer out on the ice floor. Hoofs began to slip and rattle as they made frantic efforts to stand. As one deer touched another, they lost their precarious balance and went crashing to the ice. Sometimes the slightest movement brought them down hard on the treacherous surface. Some were quiet, lying just as they fell, others struggled frantically to rise again. As they struggled they brought down others near them. Jon was sure he could hear the slight snapping of leg bones. All efforts to advance were halted at once.

The men were very grave as they gathered about Jon. They had faced many a short delay, solved many a sudden problem. But here was something! Even Jon was silent as he looked at the implacable ice stretching far in every direction from the island centre. They were marooned more surely than if surrounded by the rushing torrents of Summer.

Jon and Pehr, Akla and Mikel, spoke together as they gazed across at the distant hills. A deer might be caught and held as if to cut an owner's mark in the ear, as they did in the old country. Rough skins might be tied over the smooth hoofs as the Eskimos sometimes protected the feet of their dogs on frozen snow. But it was clearly impossible to cover the thousands and thousands of hoofs of the great herd. Mikel spoke of tying together the legs and shoving the helpless animals over the polished floor to the mainland. Again the numbers were too great for such an action. Snow would come again but it might be many days before that treacherous surface would retain a snow covering. In the meantime there was no moss on the island. Only across the ice in the wide valleys, between the hills they could not reach, grew the precious moss. The reindeer were hardy, accustomed to irregular pasturing, but they could not last indefinitely. The daytime twilight faded. Sadly pondering their great problem the men slowly retreated to the tents. Carefully closing the flaps they sat down to think. All lives, the very existence of the great herd itself, hung only on their thought. There must be something.

In the stillness that followed the wake of the wind, came the cold—the bitter cold that enters between tent folds, that creeps down the wrists of mittens, that steals through the dried grass of boots and pierces the tightest sleeping bags. The stars glittered with such frozen brilliance they seemed about to split into countless shattered fragments.

After the igloos were scoured away Kaas and Tapik and Kult had unpacked the old tents. When the wind died they fixed the tents and moved inside; but they did not like tents in Winter. They were cold and unhappy and apprehensive of further ills. Kaas shook his head, muttering of gloomy things; the mountain Spirits still troubled him.

The silence was even more portentous than the rushing wind. So intense came the cold it seemed like an actual Presence to be fought against. Long blouses of reindeer skins were put on, one over the other, with the fur inside. Extra wads of dried grass were packed inside of boots, and enormous caps, lined with eiderdown, were pulled low so the long hairy fringes completely covered the whole face. It was hard to tell who came or went unless he began to speak. The children were swathed in bag after bag until they were almost crushed by the weight. All the flaps and the cracks at the bottom of the tents were stuffed with spare skins. Without shelter, it seemed impossible that any form of life could exist through the night. And yet somewhere in that pitiless darkness were wolves and foxes without number. The reindeer were packed close together, the older bulls on the outside. Occasionally through the night, the outside members forced their way into the herd, compelling others to take a turn on the cold, outer fringes.

FOR the most part there was sleep in the Eskimo tents, but for Jon there would be only anxiety and wakefulness. Here, almost at the beginning of the long trek, he had allowed himself to be trapped like a boy. The White Chiefs who had trusted him with their great wealth would think scornfully of him. They would never depend on

any of his countrymen again, perhaps never again would they make a great gift to the tribes of the North.

It was Pehr who thought of it—Pehr the reliable first choice of Jon. He made his way to Jon's tent and they murmured together. Pehr's way was the only way. All the men, Lapp and Eskimo alike, were summoned. Each man must take an axe, a strong axe of the White Chiefs. The Eskimos hesitated, still under the spell of fear; but Jon's command and Jon's eyes were sharp and threatening. Soon they were all assembled. The ice still opened with terrible noises, the great cracks splitting to the distant shore.

Then the men began. There could be no waiting for the feeble morning light. Time was all important. Chipping, chipping, chipping, they went on endlessly, tirelessly. Parallel to the shore line they began the corrugations—hundreds and hundreds and thousands and thousands of shallow parallel nickings in the ice, making a narrow rough-surfaced path from island to mainland. Over this ruffled path the thousands of hard hoofs might find a hold. The men worked steadily chipping out the long niches. When they had gone far enough they turned suddenly and began chipping their way back again. Ice chips flew everywhere spattering the men as they toiled on and on. The mainland shore seemed hopelessly distant—but it was the only way.

Jon was tireless, relentless, everywhere. By early morning he had the women astir in all the tents. Meat pots were boiling, tea brewed for the Eskimos and coffee steamed for the Lapps. When all was ready Jon shouted to the men. They straightened their bent backs and made their way back over the corrugations. Already they were a little distance from the island, a discouragingly little distance. But there could be no dallying, no endless smoking of pipes. Soon the men were back chopping again.

Only the direst necessity could conceive such a task. Like a measuring worm, their progress was literally by inches. Snow which so often delayed them, now stubbornly refused to fall. Only the cold—more intense, bitter, clear and persistent, never left them for an instant. Far to the South-East a luminous arc grew at noontime, only to die away. Even the sun refused to aid in such a hopeless work.

ESKIMO ETIQUETTE

Until Stefansson arrived in a village of the so-called Blond Eskimos, they had never before seen a white man, nor had their immediate ancestors. Their knives, spears, and arrowheads were made of native copper, so Stefansson called them the Copper Eskimos. Some of them had blue eyes, and looked as if they might have been the direct descendants of members of the lost Greenland colony of Norsemen.

A Copper Eskimo meal, Stefansson learned, consists of two courses: Meat and soup, in that order. Etiquette prescribed that the hostess should pick out the choicest morsel of seal meat, squeeze it between her hands so that nothing would drip from it, and hand it to the guest of honor; and that her husband should be given the next best piece of meat. The soup was made by pouring cold seal blood into the boiling broth immediately after the meat was taken out of the pot, and stirring it briskly until the whole came almost (but not quite) to a boil.

JON himself seized an axe and chopped with a frenzied energy. The men were hardly conscious of night or day, only of bent backs, of bombardment of ice chips, of brief intervals for food and rest. It seemed their stiff, cold bodies were hardly settled before the call came to face frost and darkness again and yet again. Once Kult had failed to appear and Jon went after him. What happened in Kult's tent was never known but Kult chopped more ice furrows than ever before. The men were too tired to talk. They worked on, side by side, like shadowy spectres in a twilight world. They could not remember when their task had started; they had no hope of it ever ending. They were spirits condemned to everlasting labor in an inferno of perpetual ice. Their world was ice, they breathed ice, and in the brief intervals of rest they kept on cutting ice even in their sleep.

Then came a night of lights. Long after the grey twilight of mid-day had faded the brightness began. A luminous glow like sunrise shimmered low in the sky. But it was not sunrise; it began in the mysterious North behind the frozen sea from whence the black storms came—the home of the Sightless Spirit who strove against the Sun. The glow widened and sent bright tentacles feeling their way higher and higher up between the stars. The tentacles became rib-

bons and banners, waving and folding and floating in a maze of colored convolutions. The streamers shot to the top of the sky, glowing and weaving in weird fantasy; outshining the stars, then becoming so thin the stars twinkled through the gauzy curtain.

When the red curtain moved as if fluttered by a soundless sky wind the workers paused to gaze. The intense glow reflected a pale light from the smooth ice surface. The men were like black ants against a camp fire of sky spirits. Lapps and Eskimos had watched these wavering fires for many Winters but never had the fires dropped so close to earth before. It seemed impossible not to hear the rush and crackle of the dancing tongues. Tapik and Kult closed their eyes to the fiery spears which they expected momentarily to touch and annihilate them. Kaas moved his lips unceasingly in soundless supplication. Even the Lapps were affected, casting timtid, side-long glances skyward as if not daring to face the full glory of the North.

Then as they came, the fires faded, withdrawing their vast streamers and retreating swiftly into the mystery of their dwelling place. When the sky was almost dark again the men heard Jon coming from the reindeer and the sound of the endless chipping began once more.

When the path was cut more than half way across, the tents were moved to the mainland. It was better so. There was a safer feeling among the hills than on the flat rocks of the exposed island. There was snow for igloos and the workers on the ice were nearer their food supply. If the reindeer were able to cross, a pasture had already been found for them. It was likely that men and animals would stay here a long time to recover from the labor of ice and the starvation of the island.

On the last day there was no let-up for the choppers. The women brought the boiled meat across the narrow bit of uncut ice and the men ate rapidly as they stood. Then the axes clinked again. They neared the shore and on and on they labored into the night. They felt they could stand no longer but Jon was everywhere, grim and unsparing. The weaker reindeer had begun to drop. The men were past feeling, numb with cold and fatigue. They could not feel their hands on the handles of the axes; but still the axes rose and fell—the endless, automatic axes.

When the last inch was done the choppers dropped where they stood. The women were huddled together waiting for them. The men could not let go of their axes; their hands seemed clasped in an everlasting grip. The women, helping each other, dragged men and axes into tent and igloo. For them the terrible labor was ended.

But not for Jon. Waiting for no one he gathered the herd dogs and started back over the ice path. The dogs were alert and eager from their long rest. Jon moved on under the frozen-tipped stars to the treacherous island that had lured him with the promise of a camping place. Every hour was precious; already he knew the weaker reindeer could not stand. When he reached the animals again he felt their great silent welcome. It seemed to Jon that in some way they knew he would not really desert them. As he passed behind them they turned their heads to watch him.

WHEN the dogs slowly circled the herd the deer knew they were to move again. All their movements were slow and stiff. Such hollows were in their sides, Jon tried not to look at them. For a long time he had planned what he must do next. He would lasso an old driver and lead it out on the middle of the ice path. The others, with the dogs behind them, would follow. Jon hardly needed a lasso. When he caught the deer it did not plunge and dash wildly as usual. After a few uncertain steps it stopped. When Jon fixed the loop over the antlers and was ready, the deer moved with him, so docile and slow it was pathetic. Jon could feel hardly any tug at the end of his line.

When they came to the ice the deer halted. But it had little strength to resist and Jon's steady pull brought it slowly over the corrugations. Those on the edge of the herd next the ice, crowded by others behind, began to follow. It was a strange, star-lit procession, slowly lengthening across the great floor. When a deer stepped too close to the edge of the chopped path and felt the slippery ice beyond, it drew back. Sometimes a slight push from those on the inside of the path sent an unfortunate deer sprawling on the smooth ice outside. There followed a feeble struggle to stand upright again. Not often could a deer, once down, regain the corrugations. But Jon did not expect to save them all—yet it was sad to

pass on and leave even a few. They tried so hard and looked with such a longing after the others.

On and on they went with almost imperceptible movement over the silent field. The hope of the long trek, the life of far tribes and other times, the great plan of the White Chiefs—all this and even more crept on through the night. Jon had not failed—not quite. Yet disaster had been so close that he was worn with the strain of it. As he neared the mainland shore he felt his strength slipping from him. But he had kept the faith.

Pehr came down the shore to meet him—who had dropped from endless labor and was the first to revive. Without a word he took the line from Jon's failing hands. Pehr marched on with the lead reindeer toward a valley of thick moss. Jon stumbled, groping like a blind man. Perhaps he was dreaming and would soon waken to seize his axe and cut ice again. Would the herd live until the path was finished? But somewhere—it seemed in another part of his mind, there was a persistent, exulting cry: Safe! Safe! Safe! Jon felt the flap of his tent and fell inside.

V

AFTERWARDS they called the place where they camped "The Long Rest." For six weeks, after crossing the ice path from the island, they had not moved. Many days the men slept, only waking to eat, and eating, to sleep again. They had not been starved except for sleep and rest; but to revive the deer had taken longer. More than one hundred had been lost. Some had not been able to leave the island; others had slipped and fallen along the ice path, and some had lacked the strength to paw through the snow even after they reached pasture.

The fallen reindeer had all been killed, although they were so thin the food value was not great. Still there was always something and the use for skins seemed to be without limit. Slowly the great herd revived; daily their backs became a little broader and the ribs did not show quite so much. As if to compensate for past wrongs, Winter sent no storm until the deer had revived a little. The moss was thick in the Valley and the snow not too deep.

SALTY TALE

Some members of Stefansson's expeditions found it difficult to give up the habit of using salt in food. But it seems that after they had been a month or six weeks without salt, they ceased to long for it. As for the explorer himself, after about six months of a non-salt diet, he found the taste of meat boiled in salted water to be distinctly disagreeable. Among the Copper Eskimos the use of salt is so distasteful that they will not eat food that contains even an infinitesimal amount of this seasoning.

The camp had been moved behind the hills so that the rocky island and the treacherous ice field could not be seen. No one wished to remember the terrifying ice sounds or the dread rushing of the wind funnel that had almost done for them. Like children, with the passing of danger their fears vanished. For the moment there was no menace from the Sightless Spirit of the terrible North, no threatening from the Black Ones of the sombre mountains. Not until a new danger struck would their thoughts be recalled to the invisible Beings, bringers of evil but never of good.

The daughter of Pehr, Neji, the Blue-eyed One, was troubled. In the long slack period while they waited in the valley for the revival of the reindeer, there was little work to do. Kult began leaving gifts again—a dried tongue, the entrails of a young seal, or the fat marrow bones. Neji remembered the gift of the bear's heart back in the early days of the long trek. Now when she played outside the tent with little Ata and Jak it became common for Kult to wander past. Neji did not like the way he always turned and looked at her. She knew he lived in an igloo with Soak. Neji's mother also saw him and the gifts he left as he passed and the two women talked together. They did not like to burden Pehr with women's troubles. Men were given to sudden angers and even to violence. Jon knew everything; he would know whatever Pehr did and they might all be looked on with less favor by the great leader.

Neji knew that she and all the other Lapps were regarded but lightly by the people of Norway. She did not know why, but she remembered the haughty airs of a family from Norway traveling one Summer

across Lapland. The wonderfully dressed mother and daughter refused the finest Lapp food, avoided touching the reindeer skins, and looked in the open tent as if they sniffed a wolf's den. Now Neji began to understand because she felt the same way about the Eskimos. What a terrible people they were with their tangled, greasy hair! How smelly they were and they never even noticed how verminous! It would be impossible to live with them in a vile igloo; even to think of it made Neji feel immeasurably superior. If Kult kept on looking at her she would speak to her father.

AROUND the great herd the vigils were never relaxed and the reindeer were becoming quite themselves again. Only a few days and they would be ready once more for the Eastward march. Pehr, Tapik, Akla, and Jon, Kult and Mikel,—round and round the turns came,—a day and a night,—a day and a night for each, one after another. There was interest in the weather, each man hoping his own turn would not come in the midst of a blizzard.

One day about the noon twilight as Mikel roamed through the hills he heard sounds of distant firing. It was strange. The sounds came from the direction where the reindeer pastured and yet the herders rarely carried their rifles. Mikel knew that Kult would be with the deer now because his own turn came next. Another shot. It was not likely to be wolves at this time of the day, nor a wolverine either. But it was something,—something that had not happened before. A feeling came to Mikel that he might need his gun; he would keep it with him instead of taking it back to his tent as usual. He sped over the snow, the shots sounding nearer and nearer.

On the near side of the herd he looked for Kult and waited but no one came. In the dim light Mikel could not see clearly, only that the deer were frightened and shifting rapidly. He began to circle, trying to halt their movement. Two more shots. Then Mikel began to come down the South edge of the herd. It was doubtless here that Kult was having trouble. Mikel moved faster. He came suddenly on a fallen reindeer, still warm. A little further on another deer and yet another had dropped beside their feeding holes. Then Mikel discovered the source of the next shot. It came from a snow-covered boulder on the hillside. And there were two,—two figures firing into the precious herd. Mikel rushed on. When he came near enough he began to shout. The figures beside the boulder moved closer together and stood watching him.

Mikel halted. He had never gazed upon so ill-assorted a pair. Too short and squat for human beings, yet they grasped ancient rifles. They were more like some undiscovered species of animal that had learned to walk on hind legs. Yet Mikel knew that they belonged to some incredibly primitive tribe,—the rifles passed on and on from some long ago whalers. The pair seemed to be watching him. Mikel did not know what to do next. Then one of them began preparation to fire again; Mikel shouted in the best Eskimo he knew:

"No shoot! No shoot! No shoot!"

The preparations halted. They seemed to be holding a short conference. Then the preparations began again. Mikel shouted:

"Hi! Hi! Hi!"—shaking his head violently. But the ancient rifle roared. On the edge of the herd Mikel saw a fine animal leap and drop and continue struggling on the snow. Jon's precious deer murdered one after another! So accustomed to the herders they did not know enough to flee! A terrible anger swept Mikel! Already the other rifle was lifted by the second murderer when Mikel fired. Rifle and owner fell together, but the creature rose almost at once. The other one began the slow process of loading his ancient weapon. Mikel rushed toward them shouting. As he ran he began to load and fire,—load and fire. When the others saw the uncanny speed of their enemy's firing, they moved toward Mikel, leaving their guns beside the boulder.

Mikel pointed to his tracks in the snow and made many signs for them to follow the tracks back to camp. Soon they were on the way. Once the two ahead of Mikel halted as if they would turn back, but a shot, whistling close, started them on. Mikel was young,—very young, and he began to be proud of this business. Nothing should stop him now from marching into camp,—the captor of two terrible monsters.

Jon's tent came first and he waited outside; he had heard Mikel's last shot. At sight of Jon the captives halted. Mikel felt that he would like to fire again to show Jon how quickly he could make them move,

but it seemed rather foolish as he had them exactly where they should be. He saw some of the others watching from a distance; he felt a pardonable pride to know that all would hear of his great adventure. He told Jon everything. Jon said gravely:

"It is that Kult should have come in with these two. Now is the time that you watch with the herd,—the time that nothing changes." Jon spoke slowly as if reading from an old book.

"But there is no Kult!" Mikel was surprised that he had completely forgotten about Kult. "Kult I did not see. If he may be wounded with the deer," Mikel suggested as he prepared to move off into the gathering darkness to keep his delayed watch of the herd.

"Cease not to guard the herd," commanded Jon. "Akla will follow to seek for any wounded." Jon turned to regard the prisoners and in an instant Mikel was lost to sight.

THE prisoners continued their silence. Nothing Jon could say moved them; either they were merely stubborn or perhaps spoke only the strange dialect of some remote tribe. Here was work for Kaas; such an old Eskimo chief might cause some ray of understanding to penetrate the denseness of these two who must be men. When Kaas came he gazed at the newcomers a long time. There was no movement, no word spoken. Kaas closed his eyes but Jon made no effort to hasten him; the old have their ways which may not be changed. There must be no disturbance to break the magic of memory, receding farther and farther to those remote days where fact and ancient lore blend dimly together.

Then Kaas made low, growling sounds

such as dogs make when they gnaw a bone after long fasting. There was no semblance of any word that Jon had ever heard in all his travels. But the two beings began to move and Kaas with them. They vanished into an igloo.

When Kaas came to Jon's tent again he told him of the two. They came from a tribe so remote and so enclosed by mountains like steep walls that men never saw them. Twice, very long ago, when Kaas had been young, wanderers had come into his father's camp. They had scaled their mountain walls and were making a journey to the sea. Their valley was the home of angry mountain Spirits who shook the solid earth and lived inside of great peaks out of which the smoke of their camp fires poured.

Much more Kaas told of the enchanted valley and the tribe of bears living there and of an animal the size of a young reindeer that came in great numbers through a magic pass that could never be discovered. But this year no food had come down the floor of the valley. As the months passed, famine faced the tribe; only the two now in Jon's camp had been strong enough to escape.

They had wandered across an unknown land finding almost no game. Two camps they had discovered nearly as destitute as themselves. One had given them powder for their ancient muskets. At long intervals they got a fox, thin and grizzly, which they ate raw. The names of these two were Ome and Uff and now they were weak with long hunger and the arm of Ome was broken by Mikel's shot.

Jon questioned Kaas about the slaying of so many deer, but Kaas shook his head. It was the Eskimo way, always to kill many,—many musk-ox or many caribou so there would be few animals left alive to warn the new herds the next year. It had always been so. Ome and Uff did not know the reindeer belonged to Jon; animals never belonged to anyone but were free to all hunters. None could claim a living animal as his own, only when slain did it belong to the killer. It was the custom; the chiefs of the tribes had said it.

SO Kaas put the case for Ome and Uff and Jon's resolve to punish them weakened. It was quite true they could not know about the reindeer.

When Jon reached his tent Akla was waiting for him. He was back from the herd where Mikel was on guard. Six reindeer had he found shot by Ome and Uff. Tomorrow the animals would be brought to camp although there was still abundant food remaining from the deer lost on the ice path. But Akla had not found Kult or any trace of him, although without light it was not easy to know.

When Mikel, relieved by Pehr, came back to camp, Jon questioned him carefully. No, Kult had not been seen today, yesterday, or the day before. True, he might have come to grief before the rifles of Ome and Uff; badly wounded, he could have lost his way and wandered into the hills. But Jon did not believe that Kult had met with such a fate.

The next day Jon called for the old chief, Kaas and together they went to Kult's igloo. Inside was Kult, lifting meat from the pot. He let the meat splash back suddenly and sat very still, Jon looked at him a long time and Kult became very warm and unhappy. When Jon spoke his voice was low and even.

"Today Kult leaves the camp of the reindeer to return no more." Jon started to go.

Kult sat on without speech but Soak cried out: "No, no! No, no! No, no!"

Then Kult began: "There was great coldness and heavy sickness came to me," he begged.

"The sick one eats no meat," said Jon, pointing to the pot.

"The sickness was to Soak—one could not leave her," Kult lied wildly and poorly.

Jon turned on him: "In the camp is no sickness, no cold, no women—only reindeer." Jon strode away but Kult followed him.

"There is once only—once only the reindeer are left," pleaded Kult.

Jon turned again and his voice was deep with anger; "There is Neji," and he was gone.

Kult stood still in his tracks. The great Jon knew everything. Somehow he knew of the foolish attentions to the daughter of Pehr; somehow he had discovered Kult's desertion of the reindeer vigil. It was no use. Kult walked slowly back to the igloo where he knew Soak waited for him with loud anger. Life was hard.

Later Kaas came to Jon to intercede for

his countryman, but Jon was unyielding. There could be no forgiveness; desertion of the reindeer and at night—it was the greatest of crimes.

When Kult and Soak were ready the Eskimos kept close within their igloos. They did not wish to see the shame thus brought on members of their tribe.

The two shadows in the West grew dimmer and more shadowy in the rising whirl-winds of snow. Then they topped a rise and were gone. Thus passed Kult, the first to break faith with the reindeer.

VI

MANY storms succeeded the first sunrise—many pinching nights of cold and many heart-breaking delays. But the black mood of hopelessness, the listless surrender to fate did not again settle over the camp. The trekkers were like children awaiting a promised holiday; much hard work and many delays might intervene but always in time of despair came the memory of the promise.

Then the word passed from tent to tent. Next day they would pass over the ice of a nameless river and settle for the Summer on the wide uplands beyond. Jon had said it. No more struggles with sleds and hidden boulders; no more breaking of harness and pitching of tents in the dark. Only a long leisure of easy repairs and pleasant hunting in the bright, clear days that hardly darkened before they were bright again. There would be ptarmigans and eider ducks, salmon and the tasty larvae of black flies.

In the early morning Jon crossed. Old Kaas went with him; together they would select the permanent Summer camp. Before noon the reindeer sleds, the dog teams, men, women and children were across the slushy ice and up the steep bank of the stream. It gave them a wonderful feeling to look back and know that not for a long time need they touch ice or snow again. They joined Jon and Kaas and began to put up the tents with the eagerness of pioneers on a new town-site. Only Pehr and Tapik had not yet crossed. They still moved slowly, guiding, urging, directing the advance of the herd. The animals were thin and spiritless; they limped painfully on feet lame from pawing the snow crusts. The unaccustomed warmth of mid-day left them lanquid and panting—standing motionless until urged on by the herders and nipping dogs.

By noon the reindeer reached the river. They stood along the edge of watery ice unwilling to slosh their way across and climb the steep bank opposite. Pehr and Tapik shouted and waved their arms and came close to the deer as if to push them on the ice. The dogs barked and snapped and nimbly avoided the half-hearted kicks of the stubborn animals. But at last they were persuaded. Slow and reluctant, the leaders stepped into the slush, lifting their front feet high in disgusted protest. Six, eight, ten abreast, the long column slanted across. The rotting ice, crumbling like sugar, turned liquid under the churning hoofs. The thousands of rivulets pouring out of the hills, joined their small waters above the surface of the old river ice. Shallow streams began flowing in all directions over the ice, working clear channels through the slush.

At last the head of the column reached the opposite shore. The deer began a slow climb of the East bank. The leaders, working along the hard slope, reached the upper rim and moved on over the tableland above, shut off from the sight of the toiling animals below. Another hour and they would be resting on the dry moss of the Summer pasture.

Then Pehr saw a struggling and milling in the line of march ahead. He shouted to Tapik and they rushed forward. Deer were down, not only down but through into the deep water below the ice. Thousands of sharp hoofs had worn through a place made thin by the swift, fretting current below. Along the weakened line of march the ice began to sink. Pehr and Tapik gazed on a mass of struggling animals, tossing ice cakes, and the terrible openings of swift black water. Once released from its Winter prison, the angry river began pouring over the ice below the break. The weight of water above crushed loose larger and larger areas of old ice.

THE deer leaped frantically from the crumbling ice-edges crashing into other animals that stood stupidly barring their way. Small herds succeeded in retreating and keeping themselves free from the open water. Straggling and unnoticed, they made

their way shoreward. Pehr and Tapik could do little. Opposed to the arrow speed of the awful water, human strength or human cunning availed nothing. Helpless, they stared at the bursting river, unconscious of their own danger.

The deer had scattered in all directions. Up stream from the breaking river the animals appeared safe; singly or in small groups they moved to join the others on shore. Once Pehr and Tapik saw three deer close to shore suddenly whirled from their nearly-won safety. Like boys on a raft, they stood close together on their ice cake. The cake turned slowly, rocking from side to side in the speeding current. The deer tried desperately to keep their footing, moving their feet like river-men on rolling logs. Then the cake touched some underwater obstruction. Instantly the three were in the current. Pehr and Tapik could see their ears for a moment before the river carried them on. It was sad; they had been so close to shore. Pehr imagined he could see their eyes as they gazed towards the others on the solid land.

Jon and Kaas and Mikel and the others began to gather along the rim of the high bank. They looked down on the broken ranks of the reindeer and the widening strips of open water. Far out from shore the river had heaped a mass of broken ice. The watchers could see two dark animal bodies held fast by the crushing cakes. One still moved its head from side to side.

Mikel shouted and began to slide down the bank. Jon leaped after him and together they reached the bottom. But the ice was too treacherous; they could not venture from shore. Pehr and Tapik gained the land at a higher point and came running to meet them. They began to patrol the shore; it was all they dared to do. When Akla came with the lassoes they ran along beside the open water watching for bobbing heads. The deer were wonderful swimmers; it was amazing how long they could struggle in the rush of water.

Along the lower line of open water the current held a fringe of deer against the broken ice edge. They were exhausted and could not move against the current to free themselves. For a long time they kept their heads up, never quite able to reach the shore, nor quite strong enough to clamber on the ice beside them. One by one they disappeared. Others swirling down, took their places. Then after a long time, they too, ceased struggling and sank from sight.

The men along shore worked in a frenzy of rescue. They almost toppled from their slippery foot-holds as they whirled out the lassoes to their greatest length. When the noose caught over the tossing antlers, there came a strong, steady pull from shore. The tired animals stood a moment where they were drawn out. Sometimes they dropped just above the water-line and lay panting; others moved slowly along the shore, gaining strength for the climb to the rim above. So desperate was the battle, the aid of the lassoes seemed just enough to bring in many of the strugglers about to be whirled from their hard-won safety. Sometimes they came too fast and one was missed. The current, setting out strongly from the shore, bore the lost one bobbing farther and farther away. It still kept looking landward with such pathetic appeal that even the stoic Eskimos were moved.

THE men worked with gasping breath almost as exhausted as the rescued deer. Then they could see no more antlers tossing through the swirls. All the animals on the ice had reached shore or broken through and had been lost or rescued. Deer lay all along the river's edge, too spent to climb the bank. Jon ordered all hands to gather moss into bundles and roll the bundles down the slope. Jon and Pehr caught the bales as they bounced down to shore level. They tore them open and scattered the moss in front of the animals that had not yet risen. The deer began nibbling where they lay. By morning nearly all would revive and make a slow journey back to the Summer pastures. Pehr must stay with them all night on the shore.

Akla and Mikel and the others wearily gathered the small herds scattered everywhere on the high lands above the river. It was hard to know how many had been lost —more than one hundred, perhaps nearly two hundred. Jon was silent and bowed with the weight of the great loss. The mistake had been his—too eager to cross the last stream, to make the last mile. If the deer had been made to scatter as they crossed — if only a small number had crossed at a time—if they had crossed in the early morning before the hot sunshine!

But they had not. They had crossed just as they had done and there could be no going back. All those splendid animals now being carried down to the sea! And these things must be told carefully to the great White Chiefs. He, Jon, was a boy—a boy only, without wisdom or experience.

In the morning the river had risen almost to the level where Pehr guarded the resting deer. Akla and Mikel came slipping and crashing down the bank to help. Slowly and cautiously they started the animals, giving them much time to pick the easiest way. Once over the rim the revived deer started towards the main herd. The men turned to look back at the river. In the night the ice had gone. They could see, through the clear green water, the immense rounded boulders of the river bed. The water seemed to lift in long smooth mounds, darting with terrible power above the rocks. Out of the hills it came, hurling itself against their solid bases with reckless strength. The men were awe-struck. Only a few hours before they had walked above those treacherous swirls. Sober and thoughtful, they turned to the wide uplands.

VII

AS THE SUMMER waned the calves grew. That was all they had to do, grow—grow and play. They began their games a little before sunset. How they rushed back and forth over the moss carpet!

Then they would face about, head to head, and begin long bunting contests. Legs braced and heads lowered, they pushed and battled harmlessly until the impatient grunts of the mothers called them to settle for the night. Jon watched the rapid growth of the young with practised eye, calculating their marching speed, their resistance to cold and all the perils of a Winter trek.

There were small late calves and calves whose growth for some unknown reason, was slow. There were always retarded young in every herd; vigor did not come to them in time to meet the hard season. It was sad to cut them off so young, but before the beginning of the long march they must be killed. Their tender meat, frozen in hard blocks, would be lashed to sleds, and night by night, thawed in the pots of tent and igloo. It was not an heroic part to play in the great trek, but in the age-old cry of the North for meat—it was yet a real part. Jon regarded them daily, marking in his mind all those that might safely be spared. The big calves continued to frolic, secure in their growing strength.

Summer was noticeably passing. The long days of clear sunlight sometimes became over-cast in the late afternoon. The vapors stealing over the sun saddened the bright colors of hills and lakes and sky. Each night the clouds vanished but Lapps and Eskimos knew these were the advance scouts of a great invading army of clouds. When the ravens began roosting in rows on the ridges it was a sign they were gathering to go away. The sea swallows were gone and the young geese began practice flights of wavering lines. There was a gathering together, a restless activity, an undercurrent of preparation going on everywhere over the hills.

Again all faces were turned Eastward; aagin the great march was under way.

The dogs trotted tirelessly; the sled deer dashed with reckless speed; skis hissed across wide valleys—there was real progress, too swift progress!

The rolling country of hills had flattened into immense plains. Without doubt beneath the deep snow, lay many a bog and muskeg and long gravel esker of a great barrens. The way of travel was level and open but without hills there was no shelter. The sweep of the wind was indescribable. In time of storm the whole snow blanket lifted madly into the whirling wind; it was impossible to tell the exact meeting place of earth and air. The cold was as pitiless as the wind, numbing, soporific, deadly. There could be no cessation in the struggle against its penetrating insistence.

Then in a night of still, cold intensity when Akla was guarding the deer, he heard it.

Far away over the infinite distance of level snows came the faint wail of a wolf. Not anywhere in all the wide world of the North could that dread cry be mistaken. Akla stood motionless, listening. Again it came, a long, wavering sigh through the darkness. He had heard the same lonely cry in his native Lapland. What a call of hopeless despair! But there was challenge and unyielding patience and sinister warning in those long-drawn signals.

THERE was an almost imperceptible stirring of the deer; a restless shifting passed over them—a ruffling wave of movement. Somewhere in the far night their age-old enemy was gathering against them. Even the animals that had not heard that cry before, knew the menace of its tone. From a great way to the South came faint calls and answers like cocks crowing in distant farm yards. A wind moved through the night and all sounds died away.

Akla knew the wolves were too far away to come up with the deer during the night. Their advance scouts were feeling out the way, calling, directing, advancing. In the incredible way of wolves they had learned of the passage of the reindeer and now they were loping tirelessly on from the South country. Once in contact with the herd, they could never be quite shaken off. Shadow-like they would drift away only to reappear in the midst of dark storms.

When Akla was relieved on watch he went to Jon's tent. There must be a way devised to meet this oldest of all dangers to the deer. Without a word Jon listened to Akla's warning. Wolves! Wolves! Added to all other troubles there would now be wolves! Throughout the rest of the long Winter they would lurk like a plague ever ready to break upon the herd. The beautiful animals he had toiled so long to bring along the way would now be terrified into panic, separated, driven apart, dragged down.

A deep anger seized Jon. He summoned the herders to his tent. There must be a great fury of attack against the wolves even before they reached the herd. They could never be made to abandon the deer entirely, but their attack might be delayed—made more cowardly and cautious and less destructive. The bludgeons that had been packed on the sleds for so long must be brought out. Unaccustomed to human enemies who could travel on skis with the speed of wind, the wolves might be overtaken by sudden onslaught. This might happen once—they would not be caught a second time. So Jon explained and the men dispersed to make ready. There could be no travel until they dealt with the wolves.

The first day there were no sounds and there were no tracks. At night the same eerie cries that Akla had heard came to the watchers of the deer. The direction of the cries had changed from South to West. The wolves were still manoeuvering at a distance. On the second day, behind snow screens, the men waited. If the wolves of this strange country followed the customs of the wolves of Lapland, they would appear shortly.

When Mikel saw a dark speck far off it seemed to have no movement. He watched for a long time and then he could see it no more. He began to wonder if he had perhaps imagined it. But it came again, and again he waited. Then he signalled to Akla; there could be no doubt now—what he saw was moving. Akla passed the word to Tapik who sent it on until each behind his snow wall knew the wolves were coming.

With what patience they came! What instinctive caution! Over the level snow the dark patch moved, halted and moved again. Sometimes the men lost sight of the pack in a slight depression, but it rose to view again and with tireless persistence, came on. Jon and Pehr and Akla from their long experience knew almost exactly how the wolves would act. They knew how the wolves would halt and seem to gather in close conference, and then a plan, an agreement would be made. The men watched these strange consultations as the wolves advanced.

AFTER their last meeting the pack divided. Part of them came on. The new division waited to select another leader. Under his direction they moved off to the South as if utterly indifferent to the work of the others. But the men knew that this second pack had been given the task of making a great detour. Later they would appear on the opposite side of the reindeer herd. With terrifying howls they would charge the deer, driving them wildly into the ambush of the waiting killers. How many times the men of Lapland had watched the old campaign! The deer never attempted any plan of meeting their ancient enemy. Always they were just as terrified; always they ran just as blindly into the waiting pack. Experience seemed of little value to their fickle minds.

Now the wolves of the first pack advanced slowly, often halting altogether. They had much time while the others loped around their great half circle. The men grasped their bludgeons, awaiting the sig-

nal from Jon. How they longed to dash forth against the cruel skulkers!

The wolves halted again. They felt something suspicious about those low walls of snow; all was not as it should be ahead of them. Then Jon gave the sign. The skis hissed down the slope as the men leaped to their work. The wolves, uncertain whether to meet the charge or slink away, stood for an amazed moment. But the creatures speeding toward them were not deer or caribou or even the rare musk-ox. There was swift purpose in that strange gliding speed. The wolves fled.

As if to compensate for many misfortunes, conditions at last favored the men. The snow surface was perfect for skis and difficult for wolves. What a savage joy to overtake the great lanky killers and swing the knotted bludgeons over them! A primitive range possessed the hunters; an avenging spirit for all the wrongs done to man and his herds since time began. Wolves! The scourge of the North; let them perish, wantonly, cruelly, even as they themselves killed!

Without knowing what they did, the men raised tremendous shouts; ancient battle-cries tore unconsciously from hoarse throats. As each roaring man came up with his enemy, he bore down a mighty blow—a skull-crushing, back-breaking blow. The wolf victims left behind, struggled feebly and lay still or dragged themselves terribly on two feet.

Mikel, the youngest and swiftest, glided far ahead. He fought that not a single wolf might escape. But some of the grey monsters turned sharply and fled at right angles to the general flight. It was impossible to follow in all directions; to left and right several wolves began to draw away; but the men pursued those that sped before them.

Ome, slow and not long accustomed to skis, came behind. He struck savagely at the animals still moving helplessly on the snow. The wolves that began to revive from a single stunning stroke, he beat down with many blows. He leaped upon them with deep gutturals of rage; his pent anger of months flowed forth with the slaughter of each new victim.

THE cold was intense but the night was clear and windless. It was a night when turned and moved slowly back across the field of battle. They were limp and spent from their tremendous efforts. They felt their efforts had not been in vain. As they passed the grey bodies on the snow and gazed on the long fangs bared in the death struggle, they knew that not again would those scourges pull down their precious deer. The men looked furtively at each other. Each wondered if he had been a screeching demon even as the others. They could not understand it; they felt like small boys caught in some unmanly display of emotion. But what an exhilaration it had been! What an orgy of satisfaction!

Hardly had the men left the field of their triumph before the herd came rushing upon them. The second pack! They had made the wide detour long before it seemed possible. The terrified deer scattered and dashed wildly before their dread enemies. But for the intervention of the men, the deer would now be falling into the ambush of the waiting wolves. How cunningly they had laid their plans! How many times, without doubt, they had succeeded!

The men could not halt the scattered bands of deer. They could only let them go until their terror had passed. Behind the last of the fleeing animals came the driving wolves. They were just coming up with the stragglers of the herd, the smallest of the Spring calves. The calves were confused; this was their first experience with a savage enemy—with an enemy of any kind. They made purposeless dashes trying to find their Summer mothers.

Many of the pursuers had not made contact with the deer. When they saw the men racing through the fleeing deer they halted; they were amazed. Their old plan had gone

APPETIZING?

One of the few delicacies which the Arctic affords the Eskimos is neroupkok, the partly-digested contents of a caribou's stomach. This is frozen, and is eaten with as much seal oil as can be conveyed to the mouth by dipping the index and middle fingers of the right hand into a common bowl of the liquid. Another delicacy is muktuk, the outer skin of the bowhead whale. A layer of pink blubber, equal in thickness to the black skin, is removed with it. The entire strip is cached in a cavern in the frozen ground, and eaten with as much gusto as we eat ice cream.

amiss. They began to withdraw. But several of the wolves had already marked their victims; they were intent on their savage business and in the turmoil of the chase they failed to notice men mingling with animals.

Mikel was the first to turn. He saw a fine calf cut off from the herd. It tried hard to reach the others; then it stood trembling, head lowered to meet whatever came. It whirled to a snapping attack from a second enemy behind. Instantly the first wolf had fastened upon it. The calf made a brave struggle to keep standing. Mikel could not reach the battle in time. He saw the sudden limpness of the calf, the bending of the forelegs, the head touch the snow.

Then the wolf saw Mikel, but it could not get under way before the blow. What a mighty blow! What a breaking of the long back-bone! The beast snarled fearfully and tried to reach Mikel; but its hind legs dragged helplessly. How swiftly the heavy bludgeon crashed a second time!

The calf looked sadly at Mikel but he could do nothing. He longed to lift it up, to set it on four good legs again, to see it dash after the others. He had tried but he had been just too late.

Two other calves the men had not been swift enough to save. The detouring pack had traveled much faster than Jon had calculated. What enormous beasts they were! How much greater their speed than the wolves of Lapland! Grey and long and lank from famine they had seemed almost ready to battle the men themselves.

Four more wolves had fallen beneath the bludgeons in the second battle. The living wolves had disappeared. The three lost calves could be used for meat—the always insatiable need for meat.

The men set out wearily to round up the scattered herd. The animals had not gone a great distance before coming upon the bodies of the wolves slain in the first battle. They halted in new alarm but their headlong flight had been checked. There was uncertain scattering East and West in long straggling lines. The men toiled on into the darkness.

The cold was intense but the night was clear and windless. It was a night when the great lights marched down from the North and danced among the stars. A faint reflection of color seemed to glimmer from the waste of snow. The deer made dark patches as they moved slowly together. When the men called to each other through the soundless night their voices were thin and clear. Guiding cries were passed from man to man, even to Mikel farthest West, and Akla, working on the East.

Slowly, patiently, convergingly they gathered, moving to a common centre. There were no dogs; they had been left in camp lest their barking warn the wolves before the men could set upon them. Through the long white night the men toiled; driving, urging, persuading. At last the deer were together in a single herd and the herd was brought nearer the camp.

The men had moved over the snow so long they were almost unconscious of effort. They pushed the skis with an endless mechanical stride like wooden men unable to stop moving. Once their momentum had ceased they would not be able to start again. Jon turned them toward the camp. They went uncertainly like men asleep.

Only Jon stayed to keep unceasing watch upon the herd. He knew the thoughtful Pehr would be the first to return; a little rest, only a little, and Pehr would take up the endless vigil. There could be no travel until the men were again restored. To Jon, their need for sleep seemed without limit.

On and on he kept the watch, thinking of many things—the deer, the wolves, the men. How the men would rejoice over their battle with the wolves! What tales they would recount to the listening camp! Wolves! Oh, they had been beaten down, driven off with clubs. Let them come back if they wished another defeat!

But Jon knew the wolves. Not that day or the next would they come. But days—weeks after, out of the heart of storm and darkness, they would steal — cunningly, patiently, killingly. There could be no truce, no let-up. Always somewhere, just beyond, the gaunt, grey monsters would prowl and wail and wait. They would never sleep nor rest; they would never forget their ageless feud with man.

Henri was still in his robes. A bullet hole punctured his forehead. His rifle was gone.

MUSH FAST OR DIE!

By J. G. WILSON

It was a secret for which greed-men thirsted—the site of the lone prospector's cache. Who could have guessed the blond stranger's subtle play?

OLD CARSE was dying in his lonely cabin on one of the branches of the frozen Kamiat, and his rescuers were mushing directly into the teeth of the storm to reach him. The howling wind was driving the fine, biting snow on a slant al-

most parallel with the ground, whipping it into their fur-rimmed parka hoods and causing the Kolymsk malemutes to push against collar and chafing breast-band with muzzles low and bushy tails tucked between gray, tufted flanks.

O'Leary was ahead breaking trail, and the blond man, Dunn, stumbled behind the sled, one mittened hand resting on the gee-pole. A stand of black spruce suddenly loomed ahead out of the bitter, sifting curtain of white. The sweep of the yelling wind became a little less severe, but before they had covered a hundred yards of the easier going, one of the birch sled runners struck a gneiss outcropping and the trail-weary dogs floundered.

O'Leary came lumbering back. Before his dogs could mill into a tangle of flashing fangs he was straightening them out with stinging cuffs and sharp, salty words.

When the string was back on its feet again and the leather traces untangled, O'Leary stepped back to Dunn, who had been standing by, watching silently. O'Leary cupped a leather-palmed mitten around his mouth and yelled to be heard above the moaning of the wind.

"It is less than two miles now," he shouted. "Another hour or two, if we're lucky!"

Dunn pawed clinging snow off the face-fur of his parka hood and yelled back. "Let's make camp and wait for this to break!"

O'Leary scowled, "Somebody is dying up ahead there and you want to stop now?"

For a moment the two men stood toe to toe, eyes clashing, the snow whipping in sheets around them. It was Dunn who gave ground. He shrugged and motioned with his hands to go ahead. The wind was flapping a corner of the tarp lashed over the lightly loaded sled. O'Leary paused to fasten it, then went ahead of the dogs again.

The thick-growing spruce continued to give some protection from the driving snow, but another mile of slow trail-breaking brought more open country and the full vicious sweep of the wind. O'Leary was trying to hit the nameless branch of the Kamiat river below old Carse's little cabin. He stumbled onto the stream inside of the next hour, but in the dim gray arctic light and the swirling snow he didn't know whether he was above or below the cabin.

It was a bitter disappointment to O'Leary. He had been sure, despite the storm, that he would recognize the terrain when he hit the river. He held up a big wolfskin mitten to shield the stinging snow from his eyes and peered vainly. Some gneiss outcroppings laid bare by the wind, frozen willows lying flat and the deep, narrow course of the frozen stream—that was all he could see whenever the snow lifted a little. It wasn't enough to tell him where he was.

RELUCTANTLY, O'Leary imparted the information to Dunn and announced they would have to make camp for the night. Later, in the lean-to built in the lee of some rocks, O'Leary lay in his sleeping bag and somberly watched yellow flames eat at the resinous tamarack.

He wondered if old Carse would live long enough to meet Dunn. It had been three days now since O'Leary and his partner, big Henri Sardou, freighting cross-country for a factor up north of Fort Douglas, had stumbled upon the little cabin and found the old man in his bunk half delerious with fever.

Henri had stayed behind and O'Leary had taken half their dog string and the old man's trail-sled and mushed on to Fort Keno for a doctor. Scanlon, the government surgeon, was away, however, investigating some reported cases of diphtheria among a small bunch of Dogrib Indians in winter camp up on Peace River. The only alternative then had been to bring Dunn. It might turn out to be a mistake but it was the best he could do.

Morning brought a cold, biting wind out of the northwest, clearing skies and frozen snow skittering like fine dust across the wastes. O'Leary studied the terrain carefully and decided he had hit the stream below Carse's cabin after all.

When they were ready to start, O'Leary stepped around behind the sled and found Dunn hunkering down and drawing in lines and making notations on a crudely drawn map. To O'Leary, who had spent all of his 28 years in the north country, it looked like a more or less accurate map of their route from Fort Keno to the branch of the Kamiat, with the lines neces-

sarily vague where they represented the distance traveled during the storm yesterday.

Dunn looked up at O'Leary steadily, two angry red spots beginning to burn on his cheeks. The hood of his parka was shoved back, exposing thick, very blond hair, and cruel blue eyes under bleached brows. He came easily to an upright position, raised the skirt of his parka and shoved the crumpled up map into a pocket of his mackinaw.

"Well?" he demanded brusquely. "Are we ready to go?"

"Afraid we won't be able to find our way back?" O'Leary said. "What kind of a trail-man is it you're taking me for?"

Dunn pulled the hood of his parka down into place. "We'd better be starting, don't you think?" he said coldly.

Hot words came to O'Leary's lips but he thought of old Carse just an hour's travel away and he shrugged, clumped up ahead of the waiting dogs and began to break trail.

They followed the willow and cottonwood lined watercourse, traveling on the thick ice, and within an hour reached a cabin built on a bend of the stream and in the lee of a spiny outcropping backed up by some big spruce.

O'Leary noticed that the storm had broken off a dead spruce snag and had hurled it across the snow-covered roof. Apparently it had done no damage, for the stout framing timbers seemed to have held. It rested with the jagged butt buried in the frozen snow, the smaller end on the roof.

It was Henri Sardou who flung open the door for them. A giant of a French Canuck, he stood filling the door frame, an expression of relief on his broad face.

He pulled a big-bowled pipe from between strong white teeth. "Sacre Bleu, I was beginning to get worried! What happen, the storm hol' you up, huh?"

"How is he?" O'Leary asked quickly. His eyes sought to probe the gloom in the cabin behind Henri. "Is he still alive?"

Henri's shoulders went up and he spread his arms wide. "He is alive, yes, but who can say how he is? Sometimes in the evenings I theenk he is worse, then in the morning maybe he is a little better. I don't know." He shook a massive head that was topped by a shock of shaggy black hair.

"Fever gets worse at night and subsides by morning," Dunn said quietly. "You should know that."

The big Frenchman stared at the blond man thoughtfully, as though noticing him for the first time. Dunn had rummaged under the tarp and in the gear in the rawhide-laced basket of the sled had found his canvas bag of instruments and medicines.

"This is the doctor, no?" Henri asked.

"Scanlon is up on Peace River checking up on a report of diphtheria," O'Leary explained briefly. "A bunch of Dogribs."

"I'll go inside and see him," Dunn said brusquely. "After all, we can't do any good standing around like this, can we?"

HENRI stepped back to let the blond man enter the cabin, then came outside to help O'Leary with the dogs. O'Leary unsnapped the lines from the sled and led the string around to the pole compound at the rear of the cabin. Henri stripped the traces from the dogs, then with the leather lines looped over his arm he jerked his head at the rear wall of the cabin and said in a low voice:

"This man is a doctor, *Ami?* He doesn't look like one to me!"

O'Leary shook his head. "I don't know. My doubts have been getting stronger ever since we left Fort Keno. I may have made a mistake. I'm not sure." His eyes were troubled.

Henri's black eyes widened. "What happen?"

"Well, as I told you, Scanlon wasn't available, and this Dunn heard I was looking for a doctor and looked me up. He told me he was once a practising surgeon in the States but had lost his right to practice medicine. He has been in the north for a year or so, trying to live down his disgrace and make a new start. He helps the factor at Keno and seems to have a little money. That is all I know about him."

"And you believe heem and bring heem out for old Carse, huh?"

O'Leary nodded. "It seemed better than coming back with nobody at all. Scanlon will be gone for a week or ten days."

Henri scowled, his breath vapor making a thick white cloud as it left his lips. "Sapristi, this is a funny one, Ami. Now

tell me. What about these doubts you tol' me you began to have?"

"All the way out of Fort Keno Dunn kept a map," O'Leary said. "He sketched in our trail all the way to this part of Kamiat. Yesterday during the storm he wanted to stop and make camp. I think he wanted to do that so we would be traveling in clear weather and there wouldn't be any blank space on his map."

Henri frowned at the mud-chinked wall of the cabin that formed one end of the compound. "So? Why he do that?"

O'Leary's eyes were bleak. "I talked to MacDougal, the factor at Keno, and he told me nobody knows much about Carse, where he holes up or anything. It is said that he has struck it rich somewhere the past couple of years, probably right here, and as far as anybody knows he has never brought the gold out."

Henri nodded. "A lot of prospectors do that. Work a creek out and come out with a fortune of t'ousands and t'ousands and go back home with it in their pockets. They have nobody they can trus' to send it to. So what you t'ink it adds up to, *Ami?* Dunn is after the gold this old man is suppose to have cached?"

"I am beginning to think so, yes," O'Leary said grimly.

Henri nodded again. "Sure, why else he make that map? Is was so maybe he can make another trip out from Keno to here alone. Or maybe back to Keno alone. You t'ink of that? Then if this Dunn is so anxious to do doctor work, why he no go with Scanlon to Peace River and help him with those poor Dogribs?"

O'Leary laid a mittened hand on Henri's massive arm. "It means we'll have to keep our eyes open. I may be wrong, of course. Maybe Dunn's story is straight and he really does know medicine. If so maybe he can save Carse. We have to think of that too."

Henri scowled. "Maybe he is a doctor, maybe he isn't. Maybe he is trying to help, maybe he is after the old man's gold." His face brightened. "An hour or two and we should know, huh?"

"You had better get back inside, and I'll feed the dogs," O'Leary said. "Just remember—keep your eyes open."

"I go—we talk more about this later, huh?"

After feeding the dogs, O'Leary stepped into the cabin. Henri had cut a lot of dry spruce and green birch. The sheet-iron stove glowed a dull red, filling the dim room with warmth. Over on the pole-frame bunk an inert form lay under striped Hudson's Bay blankets. A gaunt, peaked face showed over the edge of the blankets, and feverish old eyes under white brows stared fixedly up at the ceiling.

Hands stirred slightly under the blankets, and a breakfast was getting cold in a skillet that rested on a crude table pushed up close to the bunk. The old man hadn't eaten that morning.

Dunn's face was grave as he gazed thoughtfully at O'Leary. He pushed his canvas bag away from his feet, got up off a chair and walked over to a small, frost-etched window and gazed silently out across the snowy wastes. The sun was just coming up, touching the spruce tips with a dull red.

"What is the verdict?" O'Leary asked.

Dunn turned slowly. He swung his hard blue eyes over to include Henri. "I don't know yet. "I'm not sure." He added grimly. "But it doesn't look too good, I can tell you that."

O'Leary glanced up at the roof. Through the slatted alder pole ceiling he could see framing sagging where the spruce snag pressed its weight. "Maybe we had better get that snag off the roof before we do anything," he decided. "Come a thaw and the old man will have a leaky roof."

It was Dunn who walked outside ahead of them. He went directly to the snag, brushed the snow away. He wrapped long arms around the butt and heaved slowly. Henri and O'Leary watched in amazement. The blond man's face got a little red but that was the only sign of exertion. Slowly the jagged butt of the snag cleared the ground. Dunn's thighs and back straightened. He backed up until the end of the snag cleared the eaves, then let it drop.

"Sacre Bleu!" Henri breathed profanely. "I try to move that yesterday and couldn't move heem!"

There was an odd little grin on Dunn's face as he walked back to the door of the cabin. "There you are," he said coolly. "Now I guess I had better get back to the old man."

Henri swore again. "Me, Henri, strong

like a bull moose—but this one is strong like a devil!" Muttering, shaking his shaggy head, he headed for the entrance of the cabin.

Dunn turned in the doorway to face them. "I'll have something to tell you in a minute," he announced. "Perhaps you had better wait out here."

Henri frowned. "She is col' out here. T'ink I want to freeze my ears off?"

Dunn shook his head. "I'll toss you your parka. If things are the way I think they are I don't think you'll want to set foot in this cabin again."

The grimness in the blond man's tone sent a chill rippling through O'Leary. He stood stock-still, white breath vapor twisting in the cold air in front of his face. "What is it, Dunn?"

Dunn shook his head again. "I'm not quite sure—let me have a few more minutes."

HE came back with Henri's big shaggy wolfskin parka, then shoved the heavy log door shut. They heard the bar drop into place. Henri looked quizzically at O'Leary. "What make of dis, huh?"

O'Leary scowled. "Let's give him his few minutes. Then we'll see."

Henri pulled his parka on. O'Leary walked over to the spruce snag Dunn had dragged down off the roof. He bent over it and tried the heft of it. He couldn't move it. He looked up at Henri, who had been watching him. "You were right, Henri. He is strong as a devil."

Henri nodded somberly and the door of the cabin came creaking open. Dunn stepped out into the cold. He waited until the pair had come up close to him.

"I'm afraid I have bad news. Very bad bad news."

"What is it?" O'Leary asked.

"Smallpox!" he bit off.

O'Leary grunted. "You're sure?"

"Positive. There isn't the slightest doubt."

Henri swore. Dunn turned his hard blue eyes toward the big Frenchman. "Your partner hasn't much to worry about but you have been exposed," he said. "You'll have to get back to Fort Keno and get Scanlon to vaccinate you. It may not be too late. You, O'Leary, go with him, of course. There are some things I want you to get from Scanlon and bring back to me. I'll give you a list. Go up to Peace River after them, if you have to. Get Sardou here to Scanlon and get those things I want back to me. That's your job. With luck we may pull that old man in there through."

Henri started to say something, but O'Leary stopped him. "I'd like to have another look at Carse, Dunn," he said.

Dunn let a cold little smile touch his face. "Of course, if you want to. Come on in and I'll write down that list for you."

When O'Leary rejoined Henri outside the Frenchman grabbed him by a sleeve of his parka and said, "What we do now, huh?"

O'Leary jerked a hand at the closed door of the cabin and said bleakly, "Let's get the lines on the logs and get started. Here, take this end and let's be sure they are straight-end out."

He handed Henri one end of the leather traces he had brought with him from the cabin. Henri said, "You crazy, Ami? What you going to do?"

"Get started for Keno. That *is* smallpox in there."

Henri grunted profanely and started to protest but O'Leary checked him with a glance. "Let's not talk now," he said in a very low voice. "Dunn is watching from the window."

Fifteen minutes later they were trotting behind the sled, heading down the river on the ice. A quarter of a mile from the cabin O'Leary halted the dogs, crept up the bank and peered back through a screen of frozen willows. Satisfied that the backtrail was clear, he slid back down the bank and walked back to Henri.

"One of us will stay and watch the cabin," he announced.

Henri's face cleared a little. "I was wondering if you were crazy. That is better! Smallpox—bah! That isn't smallpox back there and you know it. What kind of game you playing, huh?"

"That was mostly for Dunn's benefit," O'Leary said. "But there is this angle. Dunn pointed out the symptoms while I was in the cabin and there is a chance that the old man really does have smallpox. I don't think so, understand, but there is that chance. If he actually does have it, his life hangs in a balance and one of us had

better get to Scanlon. That much we can't avoid, no matter what we think."

Henri shook his head. "I have seen a case of smallpox. An Objibway squaw two or t'ree years ago. This thing that Carse has don't look like that."

"You're probably right, of course, but we can't take that chance. Maybe the disease hasn't reached the stage where you or I might recognize it. Dunn built up a pretty convincing case while I was in there."

Henri waved a furry fist. "We could go back and the two of us make heem talk, no? That way we find out one way or the other."

"No. He would only stick to his story, no matter what we did. Understand, I think you are right. This is just a scheme to get rid of us so that he can get into the old man's gold cache, if there is such a thing, but we can't take a chance. If it so happens that Dunn is right about Carse and we don't get to Scanlon for the things he wants, and old Carse dies—you see where that leaves us, don't you?"

Henri nodded somberly. "All right—so we will do it your way. Maybe it is best. One of us stays and watches the cabin, the other goes to find Scanlon, huh?"

"Yes," O'Leary said. "You had better go into Fort Keno and I'll stay here. If it turns out Carse does have smallpox you're the one who should see Scanlon."

Henri shook his head vigorously. "Non. For once in my life I have kept by big mouth shut at the right time. I have had this vaccinate eight months ago while I was down toward Athabasca. I never tol' you that, I guess. So I am safe, huh? It is better you go then. You been over the trail twice and know it better than me."

O'Leary considered briefly. "Maybe you're right."

Henri nodded. "Bien! So I stay and watch the cabin. But what about the old man? How can I help heem? Dunn will be in there all the time. Supposing he let the old man die? Or kill heem!"

O'Leary shook his head. "Dunn will take good care of the old man until he has found out the location of the gold, you can be sure of that."

"Then Dunn will kill heem!" Henri said.

"No. That is why you will be watching the cabin. A man seldom hides a big cache of gold in his cabin. It is outside somewhere. Keep a sharp eye on the cabin. You will see Dunn go to the cache if he learns the location. Move in on him then. Don't let any suspicious movements by Dunn go unchecked. If there is the slightest doubt in your mind, move in fast!"

Henri kept his sleeping robe, their .30-.30 Winchester and some pemmican wrapped in greased paper, and a bar of bitter chocolate. They agreed that the thick-growing young spruces on the high ground across the river from the cabin would screen a good vantage point to observe the cabin and the movements of the occupants. O'Leary figured that by pushing the dogs he could be back inside of 48 hours.

BUCK was with him. Scanlon was in Fort Keno, and O'Leary made it back inside of 44 hours. O'Leary circled away from the river as he came closer to the cabin, so that he would have the high ground across the stream between him and Dunn as he came in. He left the dogs in the thick spruce a hundred yards behind Henri's hiding place and pushed on through the thick growth.

When a few yards from the hiding place he halted and called out softly, "Henri!" There was no answer. O'Leary frowned and stepped closer. "Henri!" he called again. Then he rushed forward and an exclamation jetted from his lips.

Henri was still in his robe. A bullet hole punctured his forhead. His rifle was gone. Nothing else had been disturbed.

O'Leary moved about slowly, reading the story in the tracks. Dunn evidently had become aware that he was being watched and had crept up the thick spruce slope to send a bullet crashing into Henri as the big Canuck slept.

That had been no more than three hours ago. Gray northern jays began to scream and wheel in the spruces above O'Leary and he knew he would have to get out of there before his presence was betrayed. He returned to the dogs, worked the string through the spruce and down toward the cabin, keeping a screen between him and the small window.

As he drew closer he studied the stovepipe jutting through the snow on the roof, and his eyes became frostier. There was very little smoke, no heat eddies, as though the fire were dying. Dunn had gone!

O'Leary yelled savagely at the lead dog and sent the sled jerking and swaying toward the cabin.

In the open space before the cabin O'Leary moved out boldly. Nothing stirred inside the cabin. O'Leary yanked on the rawhide latchstring and shouldered the heavy door. He had to blink his eyes to accustom them to the dimness inside, but as detail slowly came to him, grimness crept over his face.

Dunn had gone. There was some heat still in the stove, but it was ticking away. Carse was flung face down on the bunk, one striped blanket twisted around his scrawny body. O'Leary turned him over. Pain-glazed eyes stared up at him. The old man was still alive. He straightened old Carse on the bunk and covered him.

O'Leary bent over the old man. "Where is Dunn? The man with the blond hair?"

Carse seemed to realize that here was a friend, and some of the fear and horror ebbed from his eyes. "Gone," he gasped faintly. "He took—took my—"

O'Leary bent closer to catch the faint words. All he heard was a mutter. "My feet—"

O'Leary stripped the blankets back again. Black, bitter words spilled from his lips. The old man's feet had been badly burned, were a raw mass of charred flesh and blisters. O'Leary gently rubbed some grease over them and pulled the blankets back up to the old man's chin.

On the floor were some thin birch wands with charred ends. Dunn had used these to torture the old man. O'Leary held one of the wands up. "Did Dunn do this?"

The fever seemed to have left Carse, and now that his pain had been allayed some he was able to talk more coherently. "Yes, Dunn it was," he said in a thin voice. "He burned me for almost an hour to make me tell." Under white brows the old man's eyes flamed up with anger and his face tightened. "If I ever get that skunk over the sights of my rifle I'll blow a hole in him a foot wide!"

O'Leary hunkered down by the bunk. "What did Dunn want?" he asked. "What was it he made you tell him?"

Again the bitter, futile anger crowded in the old man's eyes. A skinny hand shot out from under the blankets and thin fingers fastened themselves around O'Leary's hard arm. The old man raised himself a little and said bitterly, "The gold I've sweated my heart and soul out for these past three years. Eaten alive by mosquitoes and mooseflies in the summer and freezing in the winter. Three big moosehide pokes of it I had. Enough to keep me in comfort for the rest of my days! I was ging to work one more summer, then quit."

Slowly the intentness flowed from the old man's face, and his mouth relaxed. He sagged back. "But it's gone now, every last grain of it."

"Where did you have it cached?" O'Leary asked.

"The meat cache," the old man said despondently. "The pole with a snag near the top."

O'Leary went outside to the cache. It was a large stout log box set up on four thick poles out of the reach of prowling animals. O'Leary climbed the cleated pole, raised the door and peered inside. It was as the old man had said. Over behind the frozen carcass of a small deer a board had been ripped up, exposing a cunningly hollowed out section of one of the support poles. The opening was empty.

O'Leary returned to the cabin and told the old man what he had seen. Carse nodded bleakly without turning his head to look at O'Leary. Then O'Leary told the story of Dunn and Henri and the old man listened broodingly.

Old Carse interruted once to snort, "Smallpox? I didn't any more have smallpox than one of your dogs outside! It was pneumonia. I know, 'cause I had it once before."

O'Leary pulled his mittens on. There were things to be done. Dunn had less than three hours start and couldn't travel cross-country over rough, snowy terrain the way O'Leary could. On the other hand, Dunn had Henri's Winchester and had rendered Carse's gun useless by removing the bolt. O'Leary would have to go after him unarmed.

"Look," he said to the old man. "You have food enough here for weeks, and two or three day's supply of firewood. Do you think if I leave you for a while you'll be all right?"

Old Carse's eyes lighted up. "You're goin' after him, I take it! That's what I

like to hear! Why, sure, I'll be all right. Even if I have to crawl around on my hands and knees to rustle my grub and keep the fire up!"

"If Dunn sees me first there's a chance I may not be coming back," O'Leary warned. "He has a rifle and I haven't."

"I'll make out," the old man insisted. "I'll lay around in the blankets for a while, but I'll be up and on my feet in no time."

O'Leary was inclined to believe him. The old prospector, thin and slight though he was, was tough as a pine knot. O'Leary brought the body of his partner down on the sled, then maneuvered the sled up on the pole cache near the cabin door and lashed the tarp down tightly.

O'LEARY knew Dunn would follow his map faithfully at least as far back toward Fort Keno to where he could cut one of the well-traveled trails, the trail south to Crooked Creek or perhaps the Lac Duval trail. Accordingly, O'Leary swung boldly away from the river and made a short leg, cutting into Dunn's snowshoe trail where it veered sharply away from the river a mile above the cabin.

Dunn was traveling fast, according to the trail he was leaving. He had the advantage of a partly broken trail, though a light wind was already sifting the frozen snow into the ruts. Dunn's snowshoe marks paused and made a trampled area in the snow where he cut across the runner marks O'Leary's sled had made only a few hours ago.

O'Leary studied the trampled area carefully. Obviously, Dunn now knew that he had missed O'Leary and that O'Leary had gone on to the cabin.

O'Leary settled into a ground-eating pace. The cold was not too intense now, but frozen snow was being whisked three and four feet off the ground in long swirls. Soon the already faint trail would be blotted out and Dunn would be depending upon his map entirely.

An hour later O'Leary shifted his sheath knife from his belt under his parka to a rawhide loop sewed on the outside of the parka. The country was rougher here, strewn with hummocks, clumps of scraggly wild cranberry and stunted young spruce growing between long strips of wind-bared gneiss and granite.

O'Leary, for all his hardihood, was feeling the pace. Ribbons of rock cut into the webs of his snowshoes and made progress all the harder. He tried to keep in the gulleys between the small ridges where there was some snow to cushion his step. By now he knew Dunn was depending upon his map entirely for direction; the roughly broken trail back toward Fort Keno was now blown-in altogether.

O'Leary became more cautious. The man he was stalking was no more than ten minutes ahead. He came to a long, desolate barren. Dunn's trail struck out across it. The sun was now sending long, slanting rays to glint on the flowing miles of white emptiness, and O'Leary had his slitted leather snow goggles on.

He squinted up his eyes behind the slits and peered across the barren. Snow whirled and danced out there only to settle down and go skittering in long, wavering windrows. During the times when the air was relatively clear O'Leary could see a big stand of low-growing scrubby spruce on the other side of the barren.

He weighed the situation for several minutes, then decided Dunn had crossed the barren and gone directly into the spruce, heading for a long, low line of hills to the south, probably an important check point on his map.

O'Leary started across the barren. After the first few shuffling steps he relaxed. Had Dunn been watching for him he would have shot from the spruce thickets. O'Leary quickened his pace. A couple of small granite boulders, cupping four or five bushy, ground-hugging young black spruce between them loomed ahead. O'Leary swung out around the little island in the barren and had just begun to angle in toward the point he was heading for on the far side of the barren when Dunn's voice called out:

"Stop where you are, O'Leary!"

O'Leary whirled. Dunn stepped out from between the rocks. Henri's Winchester was in his mittened hands, and it was pointed at O'Leary's chest.

"I knew you were behind me," Dunn said calmly. "I thought perhaps I had better wait and see what you wanted." O'Leary expected the rifle muzzle to jet flame. But Dunn's next words caused him to relax.

"I'm glad you came after me, O'Leary. I think I can use you. I'm not sure of this map I drew and you can guide me as far as the Lac Duval trail."

It was a respite, anyway. O'Leary had no comment. Dunn had no intention of killing him now and that was enough. Once they had cut the Lac Duval trail, of course, it would be a different story.

"Toss me your knife," Dunn commanded.

Slowly, O'Leary moved his hand to obey. Dunn checked him for other weapons and then they set out toward the low line of hills. Half an hour later Dunn called a halt and ordered O'Leary to build a fire and boil tea. When the fire was going, O'Leary hunkered nearby and gazed broodingly at the flames eating at the dry twigs. Dunn was on the other side of the fire sitting on his pack, the cocked rifle across his knees.

O'Leary looked up at the blond man and studied the cold blue eyes. He made his decision then. He wouldn't wait until they reached the Lac Duval trail to be shot down. The nearer they got to the trail the more wary Dunn would become. Now was the time.

O'Leary shifted his weight over his toes. "Dunn," he said, "you will never get away with these killings. You have killed one man and it's not your fault Carse is still alive. I know you plan to kill me and go on with the old man's gold. You'll never get away with it. "

Dunn's answering smile was colder than the arctic wind sifting past their little fire. It embodied all the arrogant confidence of a man who has learned that he can have what he wants simply because he is strong.

O'Leary let his gaze drop, pulled out his pipe and tamped it full of tobacco. He pulled a burning brand from the fire and slowly raised it toward his pipe. He would have liked a longer brand but this would have to do. He paused with the flickering flame on a level with his pipe, gathered his muscles under him and sprang.

As he went across the fire he allowed the toe of his mukluk to kick burning twigs and coals toward Dunn, upsetting the flame-blackened billy. At the same time he thrust the brand he held directly at Dunn's hooded face. Dunn cursed shrilly and tried to come up off his pack. He hadn't quite room, however, and the smoking stick O'Leary held jabbed for his eyes.

Dunn's hands swept up and O'Leary hit him with a hard shoulder and sent him staggering back. O'Leary snatched up the rifle, but knew it was useless as soon as he had his hands on it. Water from the billy had spilled over the cold metal around the breech, and freezing instantly, had jammed the mechanism.

O'Leary sprang back, tried a bluff. He held the gun muzzle pointed low. "I'll smash your kneecap, Dunn!" he yelled.

Dunn's answer was a bear-like charge. He hit O'Leary like a battering ram. O'Leary tried to swing the butt of the rifle upward, military fashion, but Dunn wrenched it from his grasp and sent it whirling into the snow.

A chill rippled through O'Leary. Powerful though he was he knew he couldn't match Dunn's strength.

O'Leary slowly retreated. Arms spread wide, Dunn padded toward him. "You'll be sorry you didn't let me have it my way," he promised ominously. O'Leary backed up until he felt harsh spruce needles prodding him. Then he lashed out with a long left-handed swing to poke Dunn off balance.

That was the way it was for the next few minutes. O'Leary jabbing, retreating, circling. Dunn trying to get a hold. O'Leary kept back-pedaling fast. Dunn was unhurried. His movements were deliberate. His plan, obviously, was to slow O'Leary down, then he would close with a sudden rush and a grab.

O'Leary's flicking fists brought the first blood. A thick trickle oozed from Dunn's nose down over his lips. He snarled then and came on in. Both men had parka hoods jerked back.

O'Leary's breath was coming faster, but Dunn was breathing harder now too.

Big Mouth

The Eskimos are good at improvising, especially in mechanical matters. The story is told of a trapper who dropped and broke his false teeth. Within twenty-four hours they had been replaced by new ones made from walrus teeth by an Eskimo—and the new set of molars proved just as effective as the old.

O'Leary began to back away faster. Dunn had to speed up to keep pressing and it was soon evident that he was the one whose wind was suffering.

O'Leary landed a solid punch just below an eye. His right crunched against Dunn's square chin. The blond man grunted and kept coming. Breath whistling, he closed his hands into fists and tried to slug. His swings were awkward, however, and O'Leary kept out of the way of the big sledge-hammer fists and twice in rapid succession let a long, clever left leave red marks on Dunn's face.

Dunn's eyes were flaming. He lumbered forward. O'Leary backed away. He felt the blackening remains of the fire crunch under his mukluks. His right heel sent the billy clattering. With a low growl, Dunn launched himself through the air. O'Leary whirled away like a cat and clipped Dunn behind the ear as he floundered past, his arms windmilling, grabbing wildly. Dunn went face down into the snow, rolled over on his back.

Ordinarily, O'Leary would have sprung. It was an opening. But Dunn was different. To have leaped upon the prostrate form would have invited disaster. Dunn came slowly to his feet. His cold grin still lingered. Although his lungs sucked deeply of the cold air, Dunn knew it was only a question of time before he would get his hands on his enemy.

O'Leary started in a long, back-tracking circle around the fire. Twice Dunn rushed and tried to pin him against the thick spruce growth, and each time O'Leary danced away.

Five minutes became ten. O'Leary's legs began to feel heavy, his lungs harsh. But Dunn's feet slipped and slid more and his movements were more lumbering. O'Leary never did know just where the turning point came. He landed a hard blow on Dunn's temple, another behind the ear . . . and the blond man staggered!

Cautiously, O'Leary pressed his advantage. His punches became swifter and harder, Dunn's grabs became a little less vicious. Suddenly Dunn raised his arms to protect his face. O'Leary danced around him, hammering and slashing with his fists. He knew that when a man's brain is fuzzy from punches the punishment must be poured on or else the befuddled senses clear in a matter of seconds. He measured the blond man deliberately, brought over a long, looping right and Dunn dropped soddenly onto the trampled snow.

Breathing hard through his mouth, O'Leary came closer to the man on the ground. Arms bent, fists knotted, he gazed bleakly down. Suddenly, like a wolverine tearing loose from a skewering fishspear, Dunn moved. He jackknifed into a sitting position and his hand shot out and fastened around O'Leary's ankle. He gave a yank, and O'Leary felt himself whirled through the air and brought down hard on his back.

Dunn loomed above him, clawed hands spread wide, ready to throw himself upon the man on the ground. There was but one maneuver left to O'Leary. This was a battle to the death; anything and everything went. He drew back his right leg and, as Dunn launched himself, O'Leary lashed out with all the strength of trail-toughened thigh and leg.

His heel caught Dunn under the chin. Dunn was stopped in mid-air, spun sharply, his head back almost on the nape of his neck. The follow-through thrust of O'Leary's leg sent Dunn whirling yards away to drop onto the snow like a sack of loose bones.

O'Leary came to his feet. This time he knew he had won. He went over to Dunn. The blond man's neck wasn't broken, but there was no more fight left in him. He was unconscious.

O'Leary retrieved the rifle and with the aid of heat from scraped together embers and dry twigs that soon began to burn got the gun in working order again. He found Carse's gold in Dunn's pack.

O'Leary decided he would return to the cabin first with the gold, then make the long trip into Fort Keno with his prisoner. There was still a lot to be done. He walked over to Dunn and prodded him roughly in the ribs with the toe of a mukluk.

"On your feet, Dunn," O'Leary commanded harshly. "It's time we got started —there's a hangman's rope waiting for you!"

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THE ARCTIC SPAWNS A MUTINOUS BREED

By TOM O'NEIL

The wind howls and the wild sea rages, and mutiny simmers below-decks when north country law boards a wildcat whaler to match muscle and guile against a treacherous sea tyrant.

THE LITTLE steamer moved steadily, cutting the choppy waters separating ice floe and coast. There was a wind—not yet a gale—coming down from the Pole. Occassionally the wind carried rain which froze like transparent varnish over shrouds and metal surfaces.

Jesrud spun the whaling lance aside and pulled the gun up.

Only one man could be seen. He stood in the crow's nest, his shoulders resting against the hollow steel mast, a telescope held to his eye.

After many minutes the man moved, shortened the glass, and dropped it in the pocket of his blue jacket. He beat circulation back in his cold-stiffened muscles, and then, feeling carefully the sleet-slickened ratlines he lowered himself to the deck.

He paused to say something to the steersman and went below.

The galley seemed close and steamy. He stood with hands resting on hips, his narrowed blue eyes roving the dim room.

He was a trifle under six feet, narrow hipped, broad shouldered. His skin was windburned to a brownish brick color contrasting markedly with his honey-yellow hair. His mouth was wide and thin-lipped.

There was no one in the room so he sat on a stool, his feet spread out with sleet melting from his hair-seal boots making tiny rivulets across the floor. When a couple of minutes passed with no one ap-

pearing he slammed the table with his palm and shouted,

"Sargo!"

Sargo, the half-Polynesian cook came out of the potato hole and looked with no expression on his flat face.

"Yes Captain," Sargo said, giving the word a Spanish inflection.

"Coffee!" barked Nels Jesrud, master of the Nellie Banks.

Sargo met his eyes for a moment, then he lifted the tall, blackened coffee pot and banged it on the stove, thrusting a strip of dried-out blubber under it. The blubber smoked and stank before bursting into flame. Once burning it gave intense heat which set the ground and heel-coffee to thumping. During this time Nels Jesrud did not move his eyes from the back of Sargo's head.

I said coffee, not pig-wash!"

Sargo did not turn. He remained, hunched a trifle, his back towards Jesrud. There was a damp rag in his hand, and he made futile movements at the nickeled rim of the stove.

Jesrud pounced out on soft boots. The movement startled Sargo, and he got half way around. Jesrud was poised for the moment, his feet spread. Then his right fist swung, connecting high on the Polynesian's jaw.

The blow carried the stunning impact of a sledge.

Sargo went to hands and knees. His face struck the floor and he came up with lips running blood. He sat propped on one arm for a while, then he pulled himself to his feet. He didn't speak. He emptied the grounds and started fresh coffee.

Jesrud sat down in exactly the same position as before and waited. When the coffee had boiled he poured a cup, added canned milk, and tasted it. Then he spoke,

"One more like that and you go over the side, Sargo."

"Aye," muttered the Polynesian.

Jesrud finished his coffee. The heat of it further flushed his weather-reddened face. He took off his blue stocking cap and opened the front of his jacket. The galley door opened and a squat, heavy-shouldered man of fifty came in.

"Hello, Jesrud," the elder man said, nodding briefly, getting down a cup for himself and pouring coffee.

"Solly," Jesrud nodded, merely speaking his name.

"How does the floe look up there?" Solly asked.

"How does ice generally look?"

JESRUD watched Solly intently with no evidence either of like or dislike. After a while he said,

"You're going to tell me that Canada is off the bow and that we'll raise Herschel Island before dark."

Solly grinned with a good-natured twist of his mouth, "Swede, you're flattering me if you think I know where the hell in this dishwater sea we are."

"A first officer ought to know—"

"Without papers." Solly lifted a blunt finger while blowing at his coffee. "That's a very important point, Swede—without papers."

Jesrud got up, his wide mouth twisting in sort of a smile, but there was no telling by that what he was thinking.

"Well, out with it! What does a first officer without papers think we ought to do? Abandon ship and let twenty thousand dollars worth of oil and ambergris go to the bottom?"

"We could still collect the insurance." Jesrud jerked his shoulders in a hard laugh. He paused in the middle of the cabin, taking time to cinch his belt. His waist was narrow and it made his shoulders seem broader than they actually were.

"Now, there's a thought worthy of a first officer without papers! But we'll make it through. If the ice catches us, we'll make it next spring. Ship and cargo. And those mounted policemen there at Herschel Island be damned. They'll never catch me, whether the ice floe crowds me in or not. If I have to wreck this rust bucket for the insurance it'll be in the friendly rocks of the Inside Passage in good old American waters." He had been speaking in a casual tone, suddenly he raised his voice, "You damned fool, do you think the Casualty Company would hand over sixty grand without investigating to see why she went down four thousand miles north of where she ought to be?"

"All right," Solly said temperately. "I was only talking."

"What are the men saying?"

"Nothing—to me."

Jesrud spat. He went through the door, banging it behind him. The steps leading topside were wet from melted sleet. It was October third, but the weather wouldn't really have been cold were it not for that wind cutting down from the Pole.

Inside the glassed-in but unheated bridge a rawboned man with sharp, leathery face stood at the wheel, steering by compass. The dial was uncompensated, so he held to what seemed a southerly course, though actually it was due west cause of the position of the magnetic pole.

"I'll need somebody in the crow's nest if this weather holds," he said to Jesrud, speaking in an Everglades drawl.

Jesrud glanced at the dial. He told the steersman to swing five points north and hold it until sighting the ice floe.

The other man on the bridge, a young man named Pelly who had shipped as second officer, spoke with the stiff twang of Nova Scotia in his words.

"Sir, we are no more than four leagues off Herschel Island."

"Talk in miles, this isn't the Spanish Main."

Pelly bit back his anger. "We're about twelve miles off Herschel."

"So what?"

"I understand we touch at Herschel, and—"

Jesrud cut him off with a brittle laugh. Then he waited for Pelly to go on talking.

"The lady is expecting us to put her ashore at Herschel. You promised when she came aboard at—"

"Why in hell would she want to be put ashore at Herschel? A mound of dirt, a log barracks, and two hundred driftwood igloos."

"But—"

"What the devil does she want for herself—one of those mounted policemen?"

"Sir, Miss Olsen is a decent girl. She—"

"Listen, herring-choker—I don't need anybody to tell me about Swede girls, because I'm a Swede myself."

Pelly's cheeks were scarlet, but he held his tongue.

Jesrud went on, "Anyhow, there's another woman around if she stays aboard. I promised the missionary at Crittenden Bay that I'd take care of her, and I don't intend to kick her off on some spit of sand in the Arctic."

Jesrud strode out, his expression not changing as wind-carried sleet struck his cheek like flung shot. From time to time, through holes in the swift-moving mist, the ice floe was visible.

Jesrud went below to a short, dingy companion. He rapped at a door, and it opened almost instantly. The girl must have been standing close, waiting.

She was about twenty-two, though a half-frightened expression in her eyes made her seem younger. She was blonde and blue eyed, her skin very clear and white.

There was a girlish softness about her that seemed singularly out of place beside the dingy, battered door, as she faced Jesrud.

"Warm enough?" he asked.

She nodded.

HE said, "We're doing our best to make Herschel Island, Hilda, but you can see for yourself how heavy the sea is running. There's a floe closing in and the shore ice will tear our bottom out unless we hold our course."

"Are you saying you can't put me ashore at Herschel Island as you promised?"

"I'm doing my best."

"But you said—"

"There are twenty-two others aboard, Hilda. I'm responsible for every one of them." He said it in a soft voice, like he were pleading for her to understand, but between narrowed lids his eyes were ice blue and appraising as always. "You wouldn't want me to take a chance."

She stood quite still, looking at him. There was a wool blanket around her slim shoulders. Draught came from the hatch, making her shudder.

"But what will I do?" she asked, almost ready to weep.

"What would you do if you went ashore at Herschel?"

"The corporal at Crittenden said the mail sled would take me south to Aklavik, and from there I could get to Dawson City."

"Take it from me, you'd be staying in

Aklavik all winter. You'd be better off aboard the ship."

Hilda Olsen remained in the door, one slim hand holding the blanket close to her throat, the other tightly gripping the ugly-painted door. Her lips were pressed tightly together. Then suddenly she stepped back, biting her lower lip to keep back the tears.

"Hilda!" Jesrud started to follow her inside. He had the sole of his seal-boot against the door, preventing it from closing. He reached, and his hand closed on her arm.

"Let me go!" she said, twisting from side to side, trying to free herself, but Jesrud held her with no apparent effort.

She said, "You're h u r t i n g my shoulder."

Jesrud did not even seem to hear her. He appeared to enjoy pressing down on her smooth, white flesh.

The door opened across the companion and a dark-haired woman stood, leaning one shoulder against the casing. After a second she spoke,

"All right, Casanova, get your foot out of the door."

Jesrud looked around. It was still a moment before he took his hand away. He turned, and Hilda instantly slammed the door, and there was a sound of the bolt being thrown.

"You promised to leave her alone, Swede," said the dark-haired woman.

Jesrud smiled at her with one side of his mouth, "What's wrong, Ruby? Jealous?"

"Any damned day I'm jealous of you. . ."

Jesrud laughed, and stood for a while looking down on her.

She was about twenty-eight, and better looking than Hilda Olsen if girlishness were not taken into account. Her body was well developed, her waist was slim, her face rather small but not weak.

"You're jealous of me all right," Jesrud said, walking past her to the cabin and sitting in a nailed-down platform rocker.

"Believe what you please. But I told you before to stay away from that girl."

"I was only telling her why we couldn't stop at Herschel."

Ruby closed the door and stood with her back against it. "And I'll bet it was a noble reason, too. Did you tell her you didn't dare show your funnel in sight of the mounted police because they wanted you for unlawful whaling? I'll lay dollars to dogbiscuits you didn't!"

"I should think you'd be glad for her company."

"I am. It's only that I hate to see the poor kid get the run-around."

Ruby rolled a cigarette of white paper and Seaman's Mix from a big, round humidor can. She lighted and smoked the fag down swiftly in long drags.

"You don't need to worry about her," Jesrud said. "You're the best looking dame on this boat. Especially since the whisky ran out, and you stopped smearing your cheeks with that barn paint."

"Corn fed." She twisted down the corners of her pretty mouth and crushed out the cigarette. "Corn *beef* fed. Sweet name of hell—I never thought there'd come a time when I'd trade a year of my life for one lettuce and tomato sandwich. I'd rather have a case of tomatos than a case of Scotch."

"There'll be plenty of tomatos and Scotch both when we sell this cargo in good old Frisco."

Ruby wiped mist from the port and looked out. There was nothing to see except a few whitecaps disappearing into gray mist.

"And to think I left Halifax for that!"

He seized her shoulders. "You left Halifax for the Swede, and you'd do it again."

Ruby did not answer. She seemed drawn inside herself a little. Then, as though drawn against her will, she tilted her head back to press her cheek against his weather-roughened hand.

"Oh, get the hell out of here," she cried, twisting herself away. "I'm sick of listening to you."

Jesrud walked to the door. When he was going out she said,

"You *are* going to drop that kid at Herschel, aren't you?"

"What do you think?" and he closed the door.

The boat lurched a little and moved ahead as her manganese stem struck drift ice from the floe which kept crowding in from the north. It was only a couple of miles from the coast, and it couldn't

come closer without driving the ship into that last, desolate outpost of the R.C.M.P. at Herschel.

THEY sighted the low, treeless shoreline of the island about dark.

"We have three miles to spare," Jesrud said, referring to the relation of ice floe to land. "We'll slice it as thin as we can. I'll send Pelly to the crow's nest."

The young second officer climbed the sleet-crusted ratlines like he responded to all of Jesrud's commands—with tight-lipped obedience. From time to time his voice came down, warning the steersman of projecting fingers from the ice-floe.

It was dark, with only a slight, greenish aurora glow from overhead. No sign of moon nor stars through the heavy overcast.

Once the mist lifted, and the pinpoint lights of the police post were visible, then they blurred out and vanished. For that hour, as the boat moved doggedly at her ten-knot speed, Jesrud walked the deck, tense for the sound of pursuit.

Without warning a flare burst behind them and drifted down, revealing the boat in its wide circle of light.

Jesrud cursed. He took the wheel, moved it a trifle, and rang the engine room for full steam ahead.

The muffled sound of a gasoline engine came and vanished, and then came on again. Another flare burst, closer than before.

There was little fog now. The ice floe was sharply delineated by the white rays from above. The open sea slowly pinched out ahead, but several long, wandering lagoons of water pierced the floe.

Without hesitation Jesrud turned the boat, steering for one of the channels.

"Ice ho!" Pelly was shouting down through his megaphone.

Jesrud laughed through his teeth, one corner of his mouth pinching a dead cigarette. The boat was doing twelve knots and the vibration threatened to knock plates from her sides.

The second flare winked out leaving the sea a solid mass of blackness. Fragments of ice ground the boat's forward swell, then there was the slight change that marked the dividing point between open and sheltered waters.

Jesrud rang to slow the engines, and the boat wandered cautiously.

A third flare burst, this one far to leeward looking like a milk-white sphere through fog. There were other flares at intervals of five or ten minutes, all of them far away.

The ice floe broke in heavy fragments as the sea opened up to the north.

Jesrud abruptly abandoned the wheel. He noticed the sodden stump of cigarette and lighted it, closing one eye against the heat of the match flame. Then, in a methodical, brittle voice he cursed the luck that had put those mounted policemen on his tail.

Jack Solly walked inside, rubbing sleet from his week-old whiskers.

"What do you aim to do? Sail for Demarcation Point?"

"And let the police launch intercept us? Hell, no. I'm going to hold this course till morning."

"Nawth!" sang the steersman, glancing at the uncompensated compass.

There was a rain squall toward morning, and dawn broke gray through trailing curtains of mist. Ice could still be seen, lying in broken islands around them.

The day waned and night set in. The boat swung once more to the west, moving ever more slowly as the ice became heavier.

Sometimes, in the blacker hours of wind-whipped fog it stopped altogether, rocking silently. Now, after thirty-six hours, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that the police had returned to Herschel.

Jesrud went below and took off his hairseal boots. He had slept little during the past forty-eight hours. He lay on his back, but a few seconds later he leaped up, pulled on his boots, and ran on deck. His ear had picked up the distant, drumming sound of the police launch.

The craft, a thirty-five foot cabin job, was just breaking through mists half a mile away.

Jesrud's face went thin and savage as he rang for the engines to stop.

He waited as the launch came alongside, the roof of its cabin just even with the whalechaser's rail amidships.

"Lower a ladder!" barked Jesrud.

A tall, leathery faced young man in

black oilskins and sou'wester over his uniform climbed aboard.

"Captain Jesrud?" Then, when Jesrud nodded, "I'm Sergeant Barrow of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

Jesrud smiled, drawing his lips thin. He made no offer to approach, nor to shake hands. He stood, legs widespread as was his habit, waiting for the mountie to go on.

"The special officer at Bathurst radioed. We expected you several days ago."

"Then I'm damned sorry to have disappointed you."

"May I speak to you in your cabin?"

"Why not?"

Jesrud turned abruptly and led him below. There were two chairs in the cabin—a leather easy chair, and a four-legged stool. Jesrud sat in the easy chair. Sergeant Barrow stood, his strong, rather handsome face making no sign that he noticed the man's surly action.

He said, "Captain Jesrud, I have been informed that you are on a whaling expedition in Canadian waters."

"The hell you have!"

"I must take the liberty of inspecting your cargo."

"You can save yourself the trouble. I'm carrying three hundred baarrels of top quality grade O sperm oil. And a few pieces of ambergris, if you please. My God!—what luck it was to find sperm whales this far north. And then you had to come!"

"May I see your government permit?"

"For what?" Jesrud asked with a curl of his lip.

"Your permit to hunt whales within the waters of the District of Franklin."

"You know damned well I have no permit."

"In that case, I must ask that you return this ship to Herschel Island."

"Help yourself," said Jesrud. "She's all yours."

II

SERGEANT BARROW was twenty-nine. Seven years before he had joined the Mounted as constable at a small post near Battleford. He paid for his advancement to corporal by being transferred to Fort Resolution on the lonely Slave. Now, as sergeant, he was in command at the most remote of all R. C.M.P. outposts—the one at Herschel Island.

The post at Herschel, which looked toward the northern sea rather than to the great barrens behind it, should perhaps have been placed in the charge of a seafaring man which the Sergeant was not. The fact was, he and his two companions had been lost, zig-zagging through the ice-filled sea when an unexpected opening in the fog revealed their quarry.

However, there was no change in Barrow's face, no lack of confidence in his manner, when Captain Nels Jesrud spoke the words, "She's all yours."

He nodded with professional courtesy. "Very well, Captain," and stepped from the door.

He drew up, startled to see two young women in the companionway.

One was blonde, in her early twenties; the other was darker, older, and more voluptuously beautiful.

"My women, sergeant," Jesrud said from the door behind him. "You inherit them with the ship."

Barrow noticed that the younger girl, very blonde, had caught the words and deep color was spreading through her cheeks.

He turned and met Jesrud's thin-slitted eyes.

"What did you mean by that?"

"Maybe you'd like to have me say it in Scandinavian."

The blonde girl suddenly found her voice. "I don't know what he's trying to suggest, but I was a teacher at the Crittenden Bay Lutheran mission. He promised to drop me at Herschel Island. Then he said he couldn't put me ashore because of the ice-floe."

"You're Hilda Olsen?"

"You knew!"

She was surprised, and Barrow could not resist letting her stay that way. He did not tell her how it was with mounted policemen who sit out the timeless gray days of winter in log houses between the barrens and the Pole; how they dream of all the white women they've ever met or hope to meet, and memorize every woman's name which their records show

lived north of the Circle. There weren't so many — Grace Brundage, Metakala; Lily Stein, St. George; Hilda Olsen, Crittenden Bay. . .

"Who am *I?*" asked Ruby, nudging in front of Hilda, smiling up at him.

"I have no idea."

"See, honey? The big, handsome cop isn't psychic after all," she said, twisting her lips down.

Hilda Olsen did not seem to hear her. She was short of breath from excitement, her eyes eagerly watching Barrow's face.

"You will take me back to Herschel Island in your launch, won't you?"

The girl evidently didn't understand that the craft was a wildcat whaler operating on the lee side of international treaty, and that he was escorting her back to Herschel Bay pending radioed instructions from Ottowa.

"Yes, Miss Olsen. We will be returning to Herschel immediately. You will be welcome to remain there as long as you find it convenient."

She started for her cabin. "I'll get my suitcases. They're all packed—"

"It won't be necessary. The ship is returning too."

Nels Jesrud's voice rang down the barren companionway, "What the big, brave mountie is trying to tell you, darling, is that this vessel is a prize, and I'll wager the first bottom bigger than an eskimo's *oomiyak* that the Herschel Island garrison has ever taken."

Barrow ignored him. He bid the woman a courteous good day, and walked topside.

Corporal Ross had left the launch and was standing on deck near its mooring hawser.

Out of sight in the depths of the police launch, Colette, the half-breed engineer, kept the engine ticking along.

The whaler's crew were gathered at a little distance, not talking, just watching with aloof silence. Barrow could understand the minds of these men—these half-criminals. All of them had signed for perhaps one-fortieth lay, enough to keep them drunk for six months in San Francisco if the thing went off well, and maybe enough to land them two years deep in a Canadian prison if it didn't. They were ordinary looking, the sort that might sign aboard for a tramp cruise in any port from Halifax to Seattle.

Jesrud came out and spoke to them.

"I'm no longer in command here, boys!"

Then he turned and went down the hatch.

Rain and mist closed in again, and after a few minutes the rain turned to a fine, driving snow. Barrow climbed to the enclosed bridge and asked the steersman about their position. The steeersman, a hawk-faced man, met Barrow's eyes for a few seconds, then, without answering, he touched a chart with one grimy forefinger. By his manner Barrow knew he did not know, or would not tell where on that vast, foggy sea they were.

SOLLY, the first officer, stood just inside the door, grinning through a week of whiskers.

"Are you first officer?" Barrow asked, turning to face him.

"Me!" Solly slowly chewed tobacco. "No. I ain't even a common seaman. I'm just a passenger. Without papers."

Barrow said to the steersman, "You will reshape your course for Herschel Island."

"Aye sir," the steersman answered. "Will you give me a compass bearing, sir?"

"Has this instrument been compensated?"

"Aye."

"Then follow a course true south-southeast."

The steamer swung slowly, pausing now and then to avoid drift ice. To Barrow, his sense of direction playing tricks with him, it seemed that their course was still north-west.

He went below and found a cabin for himself and Corporal Ross. They went inside, and sat for a while, feeling the monotonous vibrations of the engine. A rap sounded at the door.

"Come in," said Barrow.

The door opened and a slim fellow of twenty-five entered. "I'm Pelly," he said. "The second officer." Then he asked, "Were you led to believe that the compass had been compensated?"

"Isn't it?"

"No."

"Can you tell us our exact position?"

"I don't know where we are."

Barrow would have asked him more, but he turned and hurried away. He seemed frightened. Barrow told Ross to bring the launch compass, and climbed back to the bridge.

By compass card the ship seemed to be heading due south, but with the magnetic pole to east it meant something quite different. Most likely it would take them ashore somewhere in the vicinity of Point Barrow.

The steersman's eyes narrowed when he saw Ross carrying in the launch compass.

"You can leave now," Barrow said. "And don't set foot inside this bridge until I say you can.

The steersman walked out, hooking the door with his toe and slamming it.

Barrow tried to determine their position, but it was guesswork. The long, blind chase had carried them far in the Beauford Sea. With ice running heavily he estimated the return trip at three days.

He remained on the bridge for several hours, intermittently signaling the engine room for half speed as the ice floe thickened. It was dark, and lights were ineffectual against driving sleet.

Ross relieved him, and he went below. He slept a while. When he returned to the bridge, the woman, Ruby, was inside talking to Ross.

She left almost immediately.

"What did *she* want?" Barrow asked.

Ross had a naturally fair skin that took a flush readily.

"She just wanted to talk." Then, though Barrow made no comment, he went on, raising his voice defensively. "Damn it all, she didn't have anything to do with this illicit whaling. She was practically Shanghaied at Halifax. She doesn't care for Jesrud."

"I'll take over now if you don't mind."

Barrow knew it wasn't easy for a lonely man. Not when he was young and sensitive like Ross. The North is likely to get anybody. Months stacked on months, the twilight and cold, no women except squaws—and then a girl like Ruby comes along.

Barrow gazed into the foggy darkness, and held the compass on its course. He wished that God-awful storm would break and reveal the flat-rising coastline of Herschel Island.

"Can I come in?" Jesrud said, sticking his brown-burned face inside. "Or is this private for Mounted Police?"

"Come in."

"I want to know if you boys of the red coats consider my wife a portion of your prize."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know damned well what I'm talking about. That pup of a corporal, Ross. Tell him to stay away from my wife."

"Tell your wife to stay away from the bridge."

Jesrud's eyes became even narrower. "I just saw him coming from my wife's cabin. How do you explain that?"

The words put Barrow back on his heels and his face showed it. Jesrud went on,

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"If Corporal Ross was in your wife's cabin he will be reprimanded."

Jesrud laughed, "Ha! Reprimanded. Why, that means I haven't a thing to worry about."

BARROW was relieved by Colette, his halfbreed engineer. At mess he ate boiled beans sticky from molasses, some heavy hot biscuit, and slabs of fried meat resembling beef. He recognized it as whale "tenderloin," a deep red strip removed from a whale's backbone.

He ate rapidly, not fraternizing with the men who sat with him. He went back to the bridge expecting to find Colette. He opened the door. Ross was standing with his back to the wheel, and Ruby was drawn close in his arms.

Ross turned with a sudden movement, trying to push the girl away. She wouldn't let him. She clung, keeping her cheek pressed against Ross' throat.

Barrow shouted his name, and Ross pulled himself free, backing away. There was both shock and defiance in his eyes.

He cried, "Well, damn it, don't stand there looking like that, I haven't done anything."

"You'd better leave," Barrow said to Ruby.

The woman's small, painted mouth

forced a smile. She lifted one shoulder and strolled to the door. She paused quite near Barrow and looked up at him. She wore a subtle perfume that suited her type of beauty. Angry and suspicious as Barrow was he could not help noticing her intense womanliness.

"You cannot blame me for caring for him, Sergeant," she said.

He knew she had spoken for Ross' benefit. She went outside, closing the door quietly. Barrow waited until her shadow was gone from the misty glass, then he walked toward Ross.

"Well, go ahead and say it!" Ross cried.

"Just take it easy, lad. We've always been friends. I know how it is. This damned business gets you. But we're out here alone. We're on the high seas outside our regular jurisdiction with only the U. S. treaty to back us up. If Jesrud decided to put us back in the launch and cut us loose I'm not certain that he couldn't get away with it. Maybe he would if he knew our radio wasn't in operation."

"What's all that got to do with—"

"This—I don't think that woman has suddenly gone over her depth for love of those pink cheeks of yours."

"Leave personalities out of it."

"This is one time when personalities count. She's not in love with you. She's playing you for a sucker."

Ross' mouth was obstinate. He reached to swab mist from the window and pulled the wheel a little although for the moment the sea was empty of ice.

Barrow said, "Jesrud jumped me this morning. He said you were making love to his wife. I didn't believe him until now."

"She's not his wife."

"How do you know?"

"She says she's not."

"Then why is she aboard?"

"What's that blonde girl doing aboard?" Ross cried.

"Ross. Watch yourself." A new, harder note had found its way into his voice.

"I told you once why she was aboard. She was in Halifax, and he put something in her drink. The next she knew—"

"You don't believe that?"

"Yes!" He shouted the word in Barrow's face.

Barrow took a step back. He stood very straight, his jaw clamped shut. He said, "I'll call your attention to the fact that I am your superior and you are on duty. The regulations that you are perfectly familiar with state that you must accept my decisions without question. You're to see no more of that woman as long as the ship is in our charge."

Ross started forward and halted himself. His face was scarlet, his fists knotted.

"Yes sir!" he said, exhaling suddenly.

Barrow turned abruptly and walked from the bridge.

He went below and rapped at Hilda's door. The bolt made a squeaking sound, and she opened the door just enough to peep out.

"Sergeant!" She was relieved to see who it was. "I think it would be all right for you to come in," she said when he hesitated.

He thanked her and stepped inside, only partly closing the door. There was an oil wick burning and it made the cabin quite warm.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked, moving a chair.

"Thank you." He remained standing to show that he was not paying a social call. "How much do you know about Ruby?"

"Why, very little. Only that she was aboard when I came."

"In your opinion, is she Jesrud's wife?"

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"Do they get along. What I'm getting at is this—do you think she's in love with him?"

She pondered for a while, drawing her eyebrows together over her small nose, "I think she is. She's awfully jealous of him."

"Do you think he Shanghaied her aboard?"

"She told me she was in Halifax, rumdum and broke. That's just the way she put it. She said she let him talk her into coming."

Barrow nodded, and then he smiled to show that the questioning was over. When next he spoke there was a deeper, softer note in his voice.

"I hope you don't think I'm a snooper. It's really quite important."

He sat down and drew out a briar pipe.

He thought better of it, and put the pipe away.

"I don't mind if you smoke," she said.

The soft, but heavy thump of seal boots sounded on the steps and came closer along the companionway. The man paused by Hilda's door. It was open a trifle, but they could not tell who it was.

"Hilda!" The door swung open, and Jesrud looked in at them.

The man was handsome in his bold, predatory way. He wore a gray sweater of very thick wool. He'd just come from the deck, and the mist had beaded it with tiny droplets. It fit snugly around his narrow waist and accentuated the breadth and depth of his shoulders.

He said, "Well, Barrow, I'll say this for you—you took me at my word when I told you to take over the women along with the ship. Ruby for Ross and Hilda for you. It's cozy, isn't it?"

Barrow sprang to his feet, muscles tightening the shoulders of his uniform blouse. He moved forward a step. Jesrud did not retreat. He stood the same as before, smiling with half an upper lip.

Barrow said in a low, trembling voice, "I'll not have you insulting Miss Olsen."

"Oh, my noble arm of the law! 'I will not have you insulting Miss Olsen!' You're in her room aren't you?"

Barrow started to answer angrily, but he reined in his temper and said, "It is perfectly within my right, and my ability, to put you in manacles and place you in the launch."

"Yes, my brave officer, but look at it from my viewpoint. Yesterday I stopped the ship to your hail. You came aboard, and I cooperated. You are beyond the limit of your jurisdiction and I had every right to ignore you. Now you intrude yourself inside my passenger's cabin while your brave corporal makes love to my wife." Jesrud's shoulders jerked in a hard laugh. "There's no doubt of it. You're a brave and dashing fellow while you have that pistol at your belt."

"Get away from the door."

"That has the sound of a command, Sergeant."

"It is!"

Jesrud slowly took his shoulder from the door casing and moved back. His eyes remained intently on Barrow's face. He stood in the middle of the companion with hands on hips, seal boots planted wide.

Barrow followed him outside. He closed the door. It was cold and draughty in the companion after the lamp-filled warmth of the room. He spoke,

"Captain, you referred to Ruby as your wife. She says she is not your wife. Do you have some proof at hand?"

"If I haven't will I be answerable to the Church of England?"

"She told Corporal Ross that she was Shanghaied aboard at Halifax. If you think there are no laws in regards that practice you are mistaken."

"And if you think there are no laws preventing Canadian mounted policemen from boarding an American ship beyond the three-mile limit and making love to the master's wife, you're mistaken."

Jesrud turned sharply and strode to his cabin, letting the door slam behind him.

III

IT WAS TWILIGHT of the second day, with the ship picking her slow way through broken ice, following the approximate bearing to Herschel as shown by the launch compass. Sometimes the ice clustered to form small floes. The wind had gone down a trifle, but the sea still rose and fell in huge swells.

"We should have reached Herschel by this time," Barrow said to Ross.

Ross scarcely answered, but Barrow did not seem to notice. He steered carefully, nudging the wheel a little, and then waiting for the steamer to respond. Occasionally there would be a thump and grinding sound as ice was thrust aside by her forward swell.

The night passed and still no sight of land. For the first time Barrow noticed that the two compasses failed to respond identically, yet they were both of the sapphire-jewel, silk-thread type.

He lifted the card and watched the needles swing to magnetic north. There had been no tampering with compensation. An hour later, for the first time in several days, the sun came through, lying in a lifeless white disc close to the horizon. He pointed the hour hand of his watch to-

ward it, and thus, holding the watch dial horizontal, was able to approximate true south. The compass was wrong.

He lifted it and carried it to a far corner of the bridge. The needles now swung correctly. He looked around, and his eyes fell on the low chart table. He jerked open the drawer. There, hidden by a piece of paper, lay a long bar magnet.

He tried to estimate their course and probable position, but it was useless. They might be anywhere from Demarcation Point to Camden Bay.

He sent for Pelly, but the young officer could not be found. Barrow knew of no one else who might compute their position if it were still possible now with the sun gone over the horizon.

He shaped a new course south-east-by-south and turned over the wheel to Colette, the halfbreed engineer.

He went below, looking for Ross. Ross was not in the cabin. He waited. In half an hour he heard Ruby's voice in the companionway. After a long silence her cabin door closed, and a moment later Ross stepped inside.

He stood facing Barrow.

"Well, go ahead and say it."

Barrow watched his eyes. There was something intense in their quality. He'd seen eyes like that before—the eyes of men going nuts from cabin fever, the eyes of trappers turned killer from the long loneliness and twilight of Northern winter. Not one young fellow in three stood up under life in that Far North. The kid was cracking up, but there was nothing Barrow could do. No matter what a man wanted, the Mounted came first.

Barrow spoke, carefully removing all sign of anger from his voice, "I told you to leave her alone."

Ross looked at him, his eyes reckless and arrogant.

"You deliberately disobeyed my orders, didn't you?"

"Yes, I disobeyed them. The hell with your orders! I'm through with you and the Mounted Police. Do you hear that? I'm sick of this damned cold and fog. I'm sick of you. You and your self-righteous face—"

"It's not quite that easy."

Ross laughed in a high-keyed voice, "The hell it isn't. You don't know where you are any more than I do. But I saw the sun tonight, and I know we've been going toward Alaska whether you do or not."

"What else were you going to say. You might as well get it all off your system."

"Sure, I'll say it. You have no jurisdiction here because we're in Alaskan waters. You'd better get that launch started and go back. Go back to that damned, treeless, windhowling hell in the wilderness that you've chosen for your place in life. But I'm through with it. Do you hear that?—I'm through with it."

"Why didn't you come to me as soon as you found out we were off course?"

"Because I didn't give a damn. I didn't want to be taken back to Herschel. A tundra, a flat piece of sand, and a hundred rotten, louse-crawling Itkilik Indians in their driftwood igloos—"

Barrow seized his shoulders, shaking him back and forth to get him to stop. "How long before this did you know we were following the wrong course?"

"Any damned fool—"

"Did you know that the woman planted a magnet to draw the compass off so we'd come to shore God knows where on the Alaskan coast?"

"What?"

"I said that the woman planted a magnet to draw the compass off."

"She didn't!"

"She was the only one who had the chance."

"That's a lie. I don't think there was any magnet. You're just inventing it to excuse yourself for getting lost on this God-forsaken sea. Oh, you don't need to be so holy-holy. Don't think I didn't hear about you visiting that blonde girl in her room."

BARROW let go his shoulder. With a quick movement, he stepped back. His right fist swung, smashing to Ross' jaw.

Ross' head snapped to one side, spinning his fur cap from his head. His shoulder collided with the door. He was glassy eyed, but he managed to work the knob and get half way outside. Then he stopped. His hand moved down, grabbing

for the revolver in its holster.

The revolver was set firmly. Barrow was there too soon anyway. He hesitated a fragment of time, poised on his toes. Then his fist swung once more, driving Ross backward.

He fell, slamming the back of his head against the companion wall.

Barrow strode over and plucked the revolver from its holster.

Men were running, attracted by the commotion. Sally was first down the companion stairs. And after him, Jesrud.

"Well now," said Jesrud, "if the boys aren't fighting among themselves. I'll lay money it's about my wife."

Barrow helped Ross to his feet. "Come in the cabin, Kid," he said gently.

Ross steadied himself. He slid his hand up, fingering dark hair from his eyes. After a few seconds his eyes, still wild, focused on Barrow.

"You go to hell!"

"Ha!" cried Jesrud, slapping the legs of his wool-lined canvas pants.

Ross twisted away from Barrow's hand and ran on deck. When Barrow followed, he was already out of sight.

Barrow went to the launch. He found an extra revolver and gave it to Colette, telling him to let no one inside the bridge. After a round of the ship, he went below.

A pipeful of tobacco settled him a little. He noticed that the knuckles on his right hand had been bleeding. He would rather have taken a beating himself, but there had been no choice.

He knocked out his pipe and stood up. Someone was running down the steps. He knew instinctively that the man was headed for his door, but he did not expect it to be Colette.

"Monsieur the Corporal!" Colette cried, pointing his right forefinger above. He stood, trying to think of words, his eyes seeming very white above his smoky cheeks.

"Yes, damn it man—"

"He is dead."

"Dead! Ross?"

"Yes, Monsieur. He ees dead. On the deck they foun' heem. Behin' sometheeng —I do not know what. He was dead weeth the back of hees head all covair weeth blood."

Barrow made the steps three at a time. He saw the rays of a flashlight moving, making grotesque man-shadows along the deck. A dozen or more men were gathered amidships.

As he approached some of them recognized him and made way. The flashlight swung around, catching his face in its white rays. By reflected light he could see Jesrud holding it.

Ross was lying on his back with one leg bent under the other in a disjointed attitude. Barrow touched him. He was limp, his eyelids partly opened, but the pupils not revealed.

He tore open the front of his blouse to listen for a heart-beat. He was dead.

He turned Ross over. There was a broad, ugly wound across the back of his skull. Death had evidently been caused by fracture and concussion.

Barrow remained bent over for a while, steadying himself. He felt slightly sick.

"Well, you sure did put him in his place," Jesrud said cheerfully.

The words struck Barrow like a frozen lash. He stood, opening and closing his right hand. The skin over his knuckles was stiff and sore from striking Ross half an hour before. He recalled the way Ross had fallen backward, and the crack his skull made on striking the companion wall. But Ross had stood, and talked, and he had climbed the stairs easily enough.

He asked, "Where was he found?"

"Here, I guess," someone answered.

"Who found him?"

"I did." A slim, high-boned sailor came forward. "He was layin' right there. I rolled him over to see if he had any kick left in him. Then I ran to the bridge. I expected to find you there, but that damned Injun at the rudder threatened to gut shoot me. When I got back Murray was lookin' at him."

"He was dead," said Murray.

Barrow took the flashlight and once more examined the fracture. There was only the one spot. It was like someone had driven a heavy weight from behind. And there was a bruise on his jaw where Barrow's fist had connected.

"I'll hand it to you, Mountie, you really got a punch," Jesrud grinned.

The men were shifting around. Now and then something would be said in a muttering undertone. They had rather

liked Ross, even if he was a Mountie.

Barrow spoke, "I struck him, and you probably all know. He went down. But he didn't bump his head hard enough to do that. *That* blow must have killed him almost instantly. Somebody slugged him from behind."

"Are you *sure*," grinned Jesrud.

"Yes. Because I took a turn around deck not ten minutes ago and he wasn't here then."

"Are you sure?" he repeated.

The truth was, Barrow wasn't sure, and Jesrud knew it.

"I'd like to have a word with you alone," Jesrud said, walking toward the bridge.

THE hawk-faced steersman was at the wheel again. Jesrud told him to leave. When he was gone and the door closed, Jesrud said,

"All right, so you hit him too hard. Now you have a couple of choices. You can take the whole kaboodle of us back to Herschel with you and hold us until spring. We go in front of your Canuck court and tell all we know. I dare say the boys' testimony won't leave you looking any too good."

Barrow waited for him to go on.

"On the other hand, there's nothing to stop you just putting the lad's body over the side. Accident. It happens in the best regulated police forces. Even the blonde birdie won't know what her tall hero has done. I go to Frisco, and you go back to Herschel. Nobody's hurt. Take your choice, Mountie."

"There's no choice to make. I set out to get you, and now that I've got you I'm going to take you back."

"Holy crucified hell! I never believed the press releases about you mounties before, but you aren't human, are you?" He shrugged it off. "All right. But we still have a little way to go."

"What did you mean by that?"

"Not a damned thing."

"Maybe you have it in your mind to murder *me*."

"I wouldn't be that dumb. There's no necessity of knocking you off. I have an idea you'll leave this ship of your own free will once you realize you're outside your jurisdiction."

"We argued that through before."

"Yes, but not within sight of land. Look outside the window, mountie. Swing that search around and take a squint at good, old Alaskan soil."

The boat lay with engines off, rocking easily in the repeated swells of the sea. Overhead the searchlight still burned. For a few seconds Barrow faced the man, then he turned abruptly and wiped a smear of mist from the window. Without swinging the light he could see the undulating, snow-covered bluffs of a barren coast.

Jesrud watched his face closely. Then, placing hands on hips, he tilted his head and laughed. He laughed at considerable length, his sharp voice bounding back from the close, glass and metal walls of the bridge.

"Does it look like Canadian coast to you?"

"Yes!"

"That's the coast of Alaska, and you know damned well it is."

"Neither of us know our position. I'll leave this vessel when we reach Herschel, or when I'm satisfied we're inside the limits of United States waters."

"Agreed. If that's American soil, you go. If it's Canada, you take me back. There ought to be some way of finding out when daylight comes."

The anchor was lowered, its flukes setting hard in ground ice at ten fathoms. Barrow went back to look at Ross' body. There was still a dozen men gathered around. They had been talking, but they stopped, and a taut silence greeted Barrow when he walked up.

One of them moved aside, revealing the kneeling form of a woman. It was Ruby. She saw Barrow and sprang to her feet.

Her eyes were narrowed, and her voice trembled a little when she said, "You're the one who did that!"

"You and I both know who did it, Ruby." He turned away from her and gestured to a couple of the crew. "Take him to the launch."

"Ain't you buryin' him at sea?" asked Solly.

He's not a sailor."

Barrow went below. Hilda was standing in the door of her cabin. He wondered how long she had been waiting for him. He knew by the frightened expression in

her eyes that someone had told her.

"He's——dead?" she asked, hesitating in dread of the word.

"Yes."

"They said you did it." She waiting, looking into his eyes. "You didn't do it, did you?"

She was pleading for denial. Instead he stroked his bruised knuckles while his eyes traveled to that place down the companion where Ross had fallen.

"I don't know. I struck him. With my fist. He fell back, striking his head against the wall. He struck it hard, but he got up and talked, and went topside. I don't know if that caused it or not."

"You didn't do it!" she cried.

"I'm sorry." He said good night to her and went inside his cabin, closing the door.

HE sat, puffing his pipe until his tongue burned from the hot smoke. He put the pipe away and stood at the port, trying to make out some telltale features of the shore. No way of knowing whether it was Alaska or Canada. He looked at his watch. It was almost midnight.

He snapped off the tiny electric bulb and lay on the bunk, looking at the darkness overhead, feeling the gentle rock and abrupt bump as the vessel rolled and was halted by the ungiving twist-steel anchor hawser. After a long time, he slept.

When he awoke it was still dark. Eight o'clock, so dawn wasn't too far away. The events of the past night had been feverish and fragmentary in his dreams, and now they seemed unreal.

The rocking had almost stopped; the sea lay quiet. He washed up and went topside.

The weather was clearing and winter glow illuminated the vast, rolling country covered by the first snow of winter. A cabin stood on the bluffs looking out to sea. It was probably one of those shanties built long ago in the days of the great whaling fleets to serve as shelter for the reindeer hunters they sent ashore. It was too dim to be certain, but a signal flag seemed to hang from the jackspruce pole above it.

The breeze blowing from sea picked up the flag, unfurling it, making a bright splash of color against the dull sky.

Mess was served in the pre-dawn hours. When Barrow was finished with hotcakes, saltpork and bitter black coffee, Jesrud made a point of speaking to him.

"Did you notice the weather station?"

"I saw a cabin."

"But you didn't notice the flag I'll wager." He grinned in a manner that added significance to his words. The grin said Barrow hadn't noticed the flag through his own choice. "Here's my telescope. I'd like to have you take a good look and see whose flag it is."

Dawn was brighter now, silvering the southern horizon, accentuating the flag's bright color. Even without the telescope he could glimpse the horizontal red and white stripes. It was the flag of the United States.

Barrow kept the telescope lifted, examining the cabin. It was rather more substantial than he first supposed. It had a door, closed, two windows of glass, a roof of moss laid over poles now covered by two or three inches of snow. A trail, winding up from a nearby gully, showed signs of recent use.

There was no radio antenna, and that seemed strange if it was indeed a lookout shack.

He shortened the scope and handed it back. Jesrud kept smiling a little, apparently well satisfied with the way things had worked out.

He said, "I hate to sound inhospitable, but you are now trespassing on an American ship in American waters."

Barrow nodded. He answered through lips drawn very tight, "Well, it looks like you win."

He turned, and descended to his cabin.

There were a few things lying around the room—his own and Ross'. He placed them in the big pockets of his coat, slipped on his oilskins and souwester, and stepped across to Hilda's cabin.

"It's Barrow," he said when he heard her come to the door. I'm leaving now."

She threw the bolt and looked out. "Leaving?"

"I'm returning to Herschel in the launch. It appears that I am in American waters and beyond my jurisdiction."

"But—"

"You may come along, if you want. It won't be a particularly safe trip back in the launch, but I guess you could say the same for this whalechaser headed for Bering Strait."

"Yes. Of course I'll come."

She seemed almost crying from eagerness. "You'll wait while I pack my things?"

He nodded and went back on deck.

Pelly, the young second officer was there to meet him. He'd been down with salt-pork dysentery, and he looked it.

"I have to see you," he said, close-cutting his words after the Nova Scotian manner. He kept looking around with nervous eyes. There was no one near, but he lowered his voice, "He'll never let me walk off this ship, Barrow. I know too much. He only lets me live because I can operate a sextant."

"What did you want?"

"I can't jump ship. Not without losing my second-officer's papers, but . . ."

"You're trying to say that I should put you under arrest."

"Yes. I'll tell everything I know. I'll write it out and sign it. This wasn't the only ship, you know. There was another —an old, converted freighter. It had most of the oil-rendering equipment aboard. It filled and went on toward the Straits three weeks ago. Jesrud would have gone at the same time, only he sighted two stray sperm whales. Old bulls. He struck and saved both of them. There wasn't space for all the oil, of course, but he took the grade O. And the ambergris. Worth God knows how much to the perfume makers now that the sperm whale has almost ceased to exist. I told him they were protected by international—"

"We're in U. S. waters, Pelly. Much as I'd like to, there's no legal way I could take you off the boat."

"But I'm a British subject!"

Pelly stood biting his underlip. He kept glancing ashore, at the cabin, at the flag that now and then floated in the breeze. At last he spoke,

"One of the boats was lowered last night. I could hear the blocks sqeaking."

Barrow turned sharply, peering into Pelly's eyes.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

THERE were two boats, built rather for whaling than life craft. The tackle supporting one of them was encrusted with ice, but the other had been recently worn free.

"Will you go ashore with me?" he asked Pelly.

"Yes."

Barrow went to Jesrud's cabin, calling him to the door.

"I'm going ashore. Merely a formality. I have to learn the name of that weather station for my report."

Jesrud barked, "I don't give a damn what you say in your report. I've put up with you on this ship as long as I intend to."

Barrow repeated slowly, "I'm going to have a look at that weather station."

He went topside and helped Pelly lower the boat. It was a quarter-mile through ice and choppy water. They made fast to shore ice and crossed the narrow strip of beach.

The cabin stood atop the bluff at an altitude of forty or fifty feet. The tracks of two men led to it, and returned. There was no doubting it. Jesrud had sent someone ashore to hang the flag during the night.

He climbed to the cabin. He tried the door. Moss had fallen through the roof, blacking it on the inside.

The sun was just sliding across the horizon for its brief daily appearance. In the far distance at Barrow's right the sea was broken by three dots of land, and inland, cutting a purplish depression across arctic tundra, was the valley of a river.

He knew then where he was. The river was the Malcolm, and the cabin stood at a point midway between it and Demarcation Point. So the whalechaser was still within Canadian waters.

Smoke was rising in dense clouds from the whalechaser's funnel as tried-out blubber was heaped in the furnace to build steam. He heard Colette shout from far across the water. Jesrud had cut the police launch free, and it was drifting away, buffeted by ice.

Barrow ran down the zig-zag bluff trail. He leapt to the small boat, waiting while Pelly followed with an unwilling step.

"What are you doing?" asked Pelly.

"I'm going back to the ship, of course."

"He'll never let you go aboard. He'll kill you first. I know what Jesrud is really like. When it comes to a showdown—"

"Are you coming, or are you staying ashore?"

After five seconds that seemed like a half-minute, Pelly said, "I'll go."

It was harder pulling against the breeze which kept rocking drift ice toward shore. Here and there the ice was clusttered, making them hunt a zig-zag course. They were still a couple hundred yards away when the regular, squeaking sound of a steam winch told them that the anchor was being lifted.

The whalechaser was having a hard time of it. The winch came to a stop, and started again. Stopped, started. The hawser had collected masses of drift ice during the night. The anchor flukes had set solidly, making it necessary to draw the ship close before a nearly vertical pull would make them release.

The small boat was scarcely a hundred yards distant and closing fast. Barrow could hear the jingle of engine room bells as Jesrud called for a reversed screw.

The boat plowed backward, swinging against a cramped rudder, forcing itself closer to the fouled anchor. Again, more loudly than before, came the tortured howling of the steam winch.

Barrow leaned harder on his oar, shouting for Pelly to keep up his side. He could make out a face which seemed to be Jesrud's watching from the bridge window.

Bells jingled again, stopping the engine. Waves from the steamer's struggle had the small craft rocking wildly.

There was a scant fifty yards now. A dozen of the crew were gathered at the rail, watching Barrow and Pelly fight the sea.

Jesrud walked from the bridge and paused for a second to look down on them. He said something to a little rat-faced man who ran toward the whalechaser's high bow.

The rat-faced one commenced stripping brown canvas to free the darting gun. He swung it around, examined the steel harpoon entending from its barrel, then he opened the breech and tossed in a sack of powder. He twisted the breech shut, fixed a cap, and squatted watching over the sights.

Pelly screamed something and stood up. For a moment he seemed ready to leap overboard in terror. Instead he dived face foremost to the bottom of the boat.

The rat-faced man waited, either for better range, or for Jesrud's signal to fire. Barrow rested his oar for a second and dragged Pelly to a sitting position.

Pelly's face was a twisted image of fear. But he picked up the oar again.

In another ten seconds the ship's forward flare would hide them. But still the rat-faced one remained crouched, his eyes down the sights, his hand on the trigger.

"Damn you! Are you waiting for Christmas?" Jesrud screamed.

The darting gun went off with a deep boom. There was a whine and roar of harpoon unfolding line. Pelly once more was face foremost in the bilge, and the action nearly cost him his life.

The heavy steel harpoon smashed through the craft's oak stem, glancing through ribs and planking to take out a piece of the garboard strake. It missed Pelly by a scant foot.

The harpoon plunged on into the sea. It's head contained an explosive charge timed to detonate three seconds after contact, so it was deep when it exploded with a heavy, drumlike sound.

The boat was rapidly taking water. The feel of it brought Pelly to his knees.

It was now only a few yards to the steamer's side. Barrow remained in his place, heaving on his oar.

The boat rolled slowly with its clinker side to the sky. Barrow was in icy water, fighting against soaked, woolen clothes that were dragging him down. There was a chunk of ice, its side as slippery as a wet knife blade, but its top fortunately spray roughened to hold his clutching fingers.

The rusty-black side of the steamer was close with the ice chunk bumping against it. The ladder, still down, was far amidships.

A rope splashed close. Barrow had no idea where it came from. He seized it, and pulled himself up, hand over hand.

The boat was not high in the stern, so it took only five or six grasps to reach the taffrail.

He could hear Jesrud's hoarse, angered

voice as he cursed Solly for lowering the rope.

IV

SOLLY had backed to the wall of the doghouse where he rested his shoulders and chawed his inevitable tobacco.

"Damn you," shouted Jesrud. "I'll see you go over the side for that!"

He strode forward with swinging strides.

Solly's eyes darted from side to side. He was small, and fifty, and no match for a man like Jesrud. He started to edge along the doghouse wall. Then his eyes fell on a long, whaler's lance. He seized it, swinging it around, pointing it waist-high.

Barrow was still clinging to the rail with slippery hands. He drew himself over and fell shoulder first to the deck. Icy water had been like a knife in his muscles, paralyzing him, driving air from his lungs. He groped for his gun but it was lost in the sea.

He knew it was Solly who had saved his life, but there was nothing he could do.

Jesrud had stopped a bare stride from the keen point of the whaling lance.

Solly said, "Yes, I threw him the line. Do you think we'd ever get away with killing a mountie in Canadian waters? The authorities know damned well this ship has been seized. That antenna ain't stuck on their launch for nothing. Like as not the Injun is putting our whole play out on the dot-dash right now."

"The hell with their radio. We'll be outside Canadian waters. It'll be our word against the Injun's—"

"Stand back!"

Jesrud cursed him. He had edged forward until the lance point almost pricked through his gray wool sweater. Then he wheeled sidewise, stepping back. One hand jerked up the sweater, and in the other there came a bluish gleam of gunmetal.

He had drawn a heavy, short-barrelled revolver. It hesitated a bare fraction of time, and came to life, rocking Jesrud's hand. Concussion pounded from the ship's steel superstructure.

Solly had leaped sidewise, flattening himself against the wall of the doghouse, trying to save himself from the bullet. He remained up for a moment, his knees bent, the lance slipped from his fingers. He clawed at the gray-painted metal wall, trying to stay on his feet. He reeled forward, eyes off focus from bullet shock. Red was sponging through the left side of his shirt.

Jesrud stepped back, watching him very closely. He drew down again, and his finger squeezed the double-action trigger as Barrow's chilled muscles at last responded and he dove forward.

Barrow slammed his shoulders into the man's side as the gun crashed again. The bullet was wild, striking metal somewhere, whining away.

The unexpected force of Barrow's charge carried Jesrud staggering to the wall. He retreated trying to catch himself. He struck the metal stair leading to the bridge and went down, catching himself. He still held the gun in his hand. He was trying to angle it around.

Barrow's boot swung — heavy and watersoaked. It connected with Jesrud's forearm.

The gun clattered out of reach across spray-frozen deck boards. Jesrud's hand seemed paralyzed. He rolled to his feet, clutching his forearm.

He paused, looking at Barrow with lips peeled back showing his teeth in a wolf-like grin.

"Well, Mountie, why don't you use your gun? This would be a good time to get rid of me, you know."

Barrow opened his sodden blouse, showing that his holster was empty.

The two women had just emerged from the hatch—Ruby dark and lovely with the damp wind whipping her hair, and Hilda, blonde, with that frightened look in her eyes.

Jesrud saw them and said, "So Helen has come out on the walls to watch!"

The words somehow jolted Barrow. The reference was to the Illiad, and it seemed preposterous that this raw whaling captain would have any knowledge of the classics.

"What's the matter, Mountie? Didn't you think I knew how to read and write?"

He had spoke to cause a momentary distraction. He moved back, reaching his right hand behind him. The hand closed

on a heavy iron blubber hook which hung near the doghouse door.

He sprang forward, swinging it in a smashing, overhand arc.

The hook weighed at least thirty pounds and its weight would have felled a man no matter where it struck him. But the same weight proved to be Barrow's salvation.

He moved aside, and the heavy hook, in missing, carried Jesrud off balance. He caught himself and tried to bring it around backhand, but Barrow had stepped in, poising on the balls of his feet.

JESRUD dropped the hook. He flung up his hands to fend off the blow he knew was coming.

Barrow ripped in a left and right. Jesrud took them with chin buried against his chest. He merely absorbed their force, weaving away.

He struck the wall and bounded back, meeting Barrow as he tried to follow up. Then, unexpectedly, he flung himself to the deck.

He struck the boards in a half-sitting position, supporting himself on elbows. His legs swung in a sudden arc, catching Barrow around the knees. He rolled, trapping Barrow's legs in a scissors hold.

Barrow went face foremost, striking the deck hard. It stunned him. Jesrud rolled on, seizing a toe and twisting. He was trying for the sudden bend and snap that would break bone, but with a twisting movement Barrow saved himself.

He rolled half way to his back. Jesrud's face was momentarily above him. He swung his fist, braced by the deck beneath his shoulder. It mashed Jesrud's lips.

It was not the type of blow that stunned, but it had a force that broke Jesrud's hold.

Jesrud leaped to his feet, trying to maintain his advantage. With Barrow still down he sprang, driving a knee to the kidney.

Barrow was sick. Things raced across his eyeballs. He got hold of the ladder and pulled himself up.

Jesrud was on him, swinging rights and lefts, he tried to fend them off. He was still up, holding the ladder with one hand, trying to protect himself with the other.

He placed both hands behind him and drew himself double with knees beneath his chin. His legs straightened like the released springs of a bear trap. His feet struck. For the moment no blows were hammering him. He shook his head, clearing it. His eyes focused on Jesrud, rising from the deck.

Jesrud made it to his feet. He leaped in with a left and right, but Barrow moved inside. He ripped his own left to the soft flesh beneath Jesrud's ribs.

It put the man back. For the moment he was off balance, his guard too wide.

Barrow could feel strength flowing back through his muscles now. He took half a step, set his heels, and hooked a smashing right to Jesrud's jaw.

Jesrud went down. He was in a sitting position with one hand braced behind him.

He got up and looked around with baffled eyes. Barrow struck him again and he went down again. He fell face forward to the deck and lay with arms flung wide.

Barrow turned, half expecting to see the crewmen come down on him, but they merely stood, staring at the peculiar sight of Jesrud down from another man's fists.

"It is good," said Sargo, the Polynesian cook, emerging from the shadow of the galley hatch. "It is good now that you throw him overboard. I will tell you what I have known since last night—he it was who killed the other policeman."

Barrow spun on him.

"What?"

"Last night. With spike so big. They were below, near the galley, and the captain struck him."

"Why didn't you tell me then?"

"Because I did not want to die."

Ruby ran forward. She seized the Polynesian's shoulder and commenced shaking him.

"You're lying!" she shrieked. "He never killed anybody. Tell the truth that he never killed anybody. You lie because he kicked your slats in one time . . ."

The Polynesian looked at her with no change of expression showing on his flat-cheeked face.

"He didn't!" She turned and shouted at Barrow. "You're the one who killed Ross. You're trying to frame yourself out

of it. With this hook. You knew he hated the Swede . . ."

Solly had shaken off the bullet shock and forced himself to a sitting position. He was looking down the deck. His lips moved, trying to speak, but no words were audible. He pointed his forefinger.

BARROW spun around and saw Jesrud on his feet, reeling down the deck.

Jesrud reached the high stem and half fell up the steps leading to the darting gun. He swung the gun around. There was a harpoon thrust in its barrel, but Barrow didn't know whether it contained a charge of powder.

Jesrud's revolver still lay on the deck. Barrow started for it, but Solly was there first.

He was on hands and knees. He fell back to a sitting position. The double action was too much for him to work. He cocked the gun. There was a mix-up as men ran for cover.

The darting gun boomed, sending the harpoon blurring forward. It whanged the deck, tearing splinters. The line it carried whined like a steel guitar string. There was a second explosion as the charge in its head went off.

Jesrud opened the breech, tossing in a second bag of powder. Then he saw the gun aimed at him.

"Solly!" he cried hoarsely, terror twisting the last sign of arrogance from his face. He started forward, reeling a trifle, still groggy from the beating he had absorbed. He took three steps down the stairs, hypnotized eyes on the gun muzzle.

"Solly! We've always been friends. You wouldn't shoot your old friend . . ."

"No more'n you'd shoot me."

The gun pounded.

The bullet drove Jesrud back. He went down, slamming his shoulders on the wet, metal stairs. He fell, sliding to the bottom.

Ruby watched. Her fury of the moment before seemed all spent. She walked to him and crouched down, taking his head in her lap. He was dead.

"He was mean as they make 'em, and I always wanted somebody to beat his ears down. But I didn't want him killed." She looked down deck at Solly, and wrath once more showed in her voice. "Not by some dirty old beach-monkey that couldn't even keep his officer's papers."

Solly thrust the revolver in the band of his pants. He made it to his feet, and staggered off to the galley hatch. His fingers kept digging at his blood-heavy shirt.

The arctic wind chilled Barrow through his sodden clothes. He saw Pelly, still standing by the rail where he had pulled himself to deck using the life-rope.

It was hard walking. After a while he noticed Hilda beside him, trying to help him along.

"Are you hurt?" she kept asking.

"I'm all right. Just wet. Chilled through."

He had brought extra clothes from Herschel, but they were in the launch, and the launch had been cut free. One of the sailors came after a while, bringing him a suit of long woolen underwear and dungarees.

He went inside his cabin and changed. Even in dry clothes his teeth chattered.

It seemed like waking from a dream when he found himself in Hilda's room, ensconced in the nailed-down rocker, a blanket around his shoulders and a cup of scalding tea in his hands.

He had a hard time turning his head. He'd taken lots of punishment from Jesrud's fists.

He looked up and met the girl's eyes. He noticed the anxious expression and smiled.

"You feel all right now?" she asked.

"Better than I have for a thousand years."

"And I'll get to Herschel after all!"

"Yes. I'll take you to Herschel. Where was it you wanted to go from there? To Aklavik?"

"To Dawson."

"I think it can be arranged."

He took her hand, and she didn't seem to mind.

Yes, he would take her to Herschel. She would be welcome there. He did not tell her that a dog sled might not leave for Dawson for many weeks, and even though one did he might not consider it wise for her to go. She might be forced to remain at Herschel longer than she thought. Much, much longer.

Waif of The Wilderness Pack

By DAN CUSHMAN

IT WAS the way he'd been murdered. They'd brought him in to the cache house there at Kanissa Trading Post, a day's long dog-drive from the Slave. Dead ten days, maybe twenty. Nobody knew. And the huge, copper arrowhead still frozen solid in his flesh.

Sergeant Rex McCord of the Royal

Cunning as the lynx-cat. Fierce as the wolverene, she stalked the land of the wild exile . . . alluring, savage, beauteous bait for the stanch Red Coat breed who sought the mystery of Man-Trap Valley.

Canadian Mounted Police stood up, tall and broad, with his winter cap almost touching the low ceiling of the cache house, a hard-jawed grimness on his Irish face.

"Grizzly claw marks, sure enough," he said in his usual soft voice. "But no bear ever killed him."

The trader, squat Bryce Buchanan, looked up from beneath shaggy eyebrows. "Aye. T'was the arrowhead."

Paul Baillard. That was the murdered man's name. McCord turned to young Roddy Fischer, special constable serving his first hitch with the R.C.M.P. before getting his training appointment.

"Remember him, Roddy? He was at the dog auction this summer in Na-Koosis."

Roddy nodded and tried to answer, but the words only made a husky sound in his throat.

He was twenty-one, though he looked more like seventeen—an Edmonton lad who'd had little enough to do with dead men.

McCord said, "Paul Baillard. A good-natured Frenchy without money or enemies. Well, maybe *one* enemy."

As Buchanan had said, it was the arrowhead—a crudely fashioned piece weighing upwards of half a pound, its size on the scale of a man's hand. A spearhead, one might almost think, were it not for the bit of splintered arrow shaft still bound tight with fire-shrunken babiche thong.

Rex McCord held the arrowhead, letting the warmth of his hand melt droplets of blood along its sharp-pounded edge.

"Well?" Buchanan asked, standing.

"Save his clothes. I wish you'd have your Crees bury him."

"And I'll bill the R.C.M.P. for blasting powder!"

McCord didn't seem to hear him. He opened the cache house door and descended the ladder.

"Aye!" Buchanan said above him. "The poor devil will keep well enough in the limbo of a snowbank until spring. Save his clothes, ye say. There was some money in his pants did you notice? Fourteen dollars and some small-jingle."

McCord walked to log trade-house. It was still early winter, but cold enough to make the hinges howl when he opened the door. He stood for a moment, letting his eyes get used to the dimness, then he walked across and slid a tea-kettle over to boil.

"Whisky," he said when Buchanan entered. "We need it, I guess."

Buchanan brought his private bottle. "I thought a man got used to murder in your business."

"God spare me the day I get used to murder."

A HOT whisky drove some of the buttermilk pallor from Roddy's face, and one did something for McCord, too. The three men stood silent for several minutes, looking across the trade store's cluttered dimness. Now and then an Indian would come in and stand with other Indians outside the counter watching to see what the redcoat policemen would do.

McCord asked, "You say the Crees found him?"

"Aye. Wapna, and that brother-in-law of his—the one who married the Yellowknife squaw. Yip-otta-wa. I dinna suspect them."

McCord nodded. That grotesque arrowhead might make some men think of an Indian, but no Indian would have brought him in after murdering him. He'd been found out in the Sulphur Bottom Muskegs, a two day's drive to the trading post.

Buchanan went on, "And mark ye where he was found. Out in the muskegs. He'd started over when they were but half frozen, and his feet broke through, otherwise maybe he'd have made it, arrowhead and all. Who crosses the muskegs, Sergeant?"

McCord smiled with a twist of his good-natured freckled face. "Wapna, and his brother-in-law who married the Yellowknife—"

"Pah!" Buchanan spat against the heat-reddened stove, giving his disgust a hissing quality. "Before the freeze, I mean. Of course, all men know it is a shortcut from the Roche Blanc in winter. Those Crees are no killers. Baillard had been there two weeks already, I'll wager, and were it not for the good nose on that Koosachik lead dog of Wapna's he'd be there still, covered as he was with six inches of young snow."

"He bought his grubstake here?"

"Aye. These six weeks past, and he left to take mink along Lac Rouge. But it was far enough from Lac Rouge when he was found."

McCord sat down, idly polishing the arrowhead on the leg of his trousers, looking at it by dim, afternoon light. There was no point in asking more questions. He'd already heard the story two days before when Joe Laux, Buchanan's halfbreed clerk, had flagged down his police canoe from the rim-ice along Slave River.

Buchanan said, "This trapper—he's not the first man to die strangely in that Roche Blanc country."

Ever since coming north from Battleford post, McCord had listened to superstitious tales of those wild and barren Roche Blanc hills, but he listened patiently as the trader hunched forward and repeated them again, telling about the prospectors, Norris and Shippen, and their unknown fate, of Pierre Chezles and Pauldin, and of the mounted policeman, Kim Hall. Kim Hall might have been killed in Roche Blanc or anywhere else in a thousand square miles from Slave River to the headwaters of the Laird, but he was always marked up against Roche Blanc. That's how such places got their evil reputations.

Sergeant Rex McCord kept turning the copper arrowhead. It had been hammered from metal in its native state. That, or from metal crudely refined by an Indian method. He'd seen such arrowheads before, in a museum down at Ishpeming on Michigan's copper belt.

He said to Buchanan—"Those prospectors, Norris and Shippen, what were they looking for?"

"Gold. Or any of the things that make men rich in this north country."

"Copper?"

"Aye, copper."

McCord stood up and laid the arrowhead beside Buchanan's money drawer. "I'll leave this here. God willing, someday I'll be back after it."

"You're going . . ."

"To the Roche Blanc."

"You have an idea, lad?"

"Or else I'd be a fur trader instead of a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

Buchanan started to bark back, but the grin on McCord's blunt face stopped him.

McCord drew a mouth organ from his pocket and cupped it in his big, freckled hands. He blew, and from the reeds came a long, tremulous note. Buchanan sighed and rocked back on the hind legs of his puncheon stool, eyes closed, listening while the Irishman played in praise of Mary of Argyle . . .

SERGEANT REX McCORD trotted ahead of the dog-team Buchanan had lent them, breaking trail, keeping a snap-tug tight over his shoulder, while young Roddy Fischer handled the sled.

It was easy going through nine or ten inches of snow across the miles of spotty timber to Kanissa River.

The Kanissa was still partly open, flowing the color of bullet lead between shelves of ice. McCord turned west, passing one bridge of ice after another before finding one that would support a man's weight. Stars were out by then, sharp and clear in the winter air.

They paused to brew tea and melt cold-congealed beans in the shelter of a cutbank. It was still night when they awoke and headed cross-country toward the muskegs of Sulphur Bottom.

Muskeg lay solid-frozen beneath its level coating of snow. A flat, dreary country of brush with now and then a black spruce. The second night was almost spent when the Roche Blanc Hills thrust sandstone summits through spruce and snow.

After entering the Roche Blanc they traveled more slowly. It was a steep, wild country of sandrock and still more sandrock, forming long, hogback ridges.

Half of their third day in the Roche Blanc was spent climbing the summit of an extremely steep, high ridge. From its summit McCord could see forest and nobby hills stretching away to what seemed like the misty end of the universe.

He put away his binoculars with a gesture of satisfaction. Those hills—r o u n d e d or flat-topped with cliffs columned to pipe-organ effects indicated basalt.

It was more the sort of country where one might find native copper such as they'd used in the arrowhead.

"You must have seen the murderer himself," Roddy said.

"One thing at a time, lad. Perhaps I haven't seen the murderer, but I may have sighted the pipe-organ hills he calls his home."

Roddy shrugged it off. Long ago as last

spring he had found McCord to be incomprehensible.

They descended a deep valley, crossed a river which muttered beneath early-winter ice. Here game tracks punched snow, and caribou meat would have tasted good, broiled over coals, but McCord stopped Roddy from firing a shot. The air was sharp with pine fragrance—and something else—the tang of woodsmoke.

"Five miles," McCord said, referring to the smoke. "Maybe more."

"Indians?"

"I think not."

He left Roddy there to keep watch and set out alone, circling the canyon walls, watching broadened, upper valleys for the grayish streak that would distinguish smoke from purple, winter haze.

He slept up there, rolled in his rabbitskin blanket with wind playing its arctic music through the stunted bull-pine of the high slopes. Dawn revealed rolling bottoms in heavy timber. Once he thought there was a thin, grayish spiral of woodsmoke, but it faded and never reappeared. He finished the last of his pemmican and returned.

New snow had fallen, smoothing the tracked earth at camp, covering the fire's burnt-out embers two inches deep.

"Roddy!" he called, knowing well enough that the camp was deserted.

He'd gone, and taken the dogs with him. The day before, by the looks of things. A pencil-scrawled note was thrust in the rough bark of a pine:

Something up-canyon. Wait for me. Cheerio.

Rod

CHEERIO! Some men could take their orders that lightly! McCord wadded the note, then reconsidered, put it in his pocket. He'd left instructions for Roddy to stay where he was and keep watch, but at the moment it was fear that bothered him rather than anger.

McCord got more pemmican from the cache and started up the canyon floor, following the depression left by Roddy's snowshoes. The dogs had been with him, and their tracks were dimly visible beneath young snow, ranging the timbered bottoms ahead.

Darkness came and he kept on as the canyon narrowed between walls of columned basalt that shut out half the stars. Trampled snow marked the spot where Roddy made cold camp the day before.

McCord paused, sitting on the heels of his moccasins, and cut slices from a length of pemmican, letting their congealed fat and chokecherry ice melt in his mouth. He'd been twenty-four hours without sleep, so when supper was over he spread the rabbitskin blanket and slept.

He awoke suddenly. No telling time by the stars which looked the same as ever, but instinct told him he'd been asleep no more than an hour. He listened. Somewhere, beyond the dark fringe of spruce, he could hear the whimper of a dog.

"Nantuck!" he said, speaking the lead-dog's name.

Nantuck moved in, whining, dragging his hindquarters through snow. He'd been wounded. Hip broken, maybe. McCord couldn't tell.

He pulled on his parka, groped and found the icy steel of his rifle. He was still listening for something more—for the sound of a man.

He got hold of the dog and stroked the thick, grayish fur of his back. No visible wound. No broken bones. Nantuck seemed to have taken a blow that had twisted the ligaments of his hips.

"Where's Roddy?"

The dog whimpered, seeming to understand.

McCord listented for a while, stroking Nantuck to keep him quiet.

"Roddy!"

There was no doubt of it, someone was approaching through timber. He stood up, walked, following the sound. "Roddy!"

A man was fighting for breath. Then he heard a voice—Roddy's voice, trying to answer.

McCord ran, thigh-deep through powdery snow, crashed a cranberry thicket. He came on a furrow where it looked like something heavy had been dragged through the snow. He turned and saw Roddy a dozen strides away.

He was down on hands and one hip. McCord was conscious of his eyes, peering up from shadow. He was trying to talk.

"It's all right, kid. Just take it easy."

McCord leaned his rifle, picked Roddy

up in his arms. He was unexpectedly light. Tall and big-framed but no meat on him. It made him seem more than ever like an overgrown kid. McCord carried him to camp and laid him on the rabbitskin blanket.

"What was it kid?"

Roddy was trying to talk, but the shakes running through his body kept him from saying much that could be understood. In a moment it became apparent that he was on the verge of delirium from cold and loss of blood.

McCord spoke in his old, easy voice, "It's all right, kid. Don't try to talk. We'll get the crawlin' bushwhackers. Close your eyes. That's it. Now take a few deep breaths. I'll get a fire going."

It took time for the blaze to get any heat in it. There was a two-cup kettle in his wolf-pack. He got it out, packed it with snow, melted water for strong green tea. Roddy lay watching the operation with chills still shuddering the length of his body. For the first time McCord noticed that blood was caked across the right side of his torn parka.

"Hurt, kid?"

Roddy tried to talk. He'd been trying for a considerable time without making much headway.

"I couldn't fight 'em. My rifle. Where's—"

"Fight who?"

"Where's my rifle? I want my rifle."

"Here's a rifle."

"I must have left it back there. I'd have got her if I hadn't lost my rifle."

"Got who?"

"That she-devil!"

"All right, now. You better rest."

"It was a she-devil!" Roddy got himself propped on one arm. He was staring wildly. "Damn it all, I tell you—"

"Sure. I believe you. I never said I didn't believe you. Here's some tea—"

"She was standing there. No farther'n from here to that tree. On a ten-foot rock. And she—"

"Drink some of this tea and we'll mush up-canyon and get our sights on that she-devil."

"Hair red as iron rust. That's how I saw her up on the cliff. That long red hair of hers. . ."

"Those red-heads are always the worst, Roddy. I know. I've tried 'em all. Now drink the tea."

Roddy gulped some. He coughed and started to thresh around, flinging the rabbitskin blanket so one corner of it scorched in the fire.

McCord held him. He was fifty pounds heavier than Roddy, and it took all that extra weight to pin him down.

Roddy lay on his back, wheezing through clenched teeth, eyes wild as a trapped wolverine's. Finally words hissed through the teeth,

"Damn you, let me go! I just saw her. She's out there, just outside the firelight . . ."

It was hard not to believe him. The kid was out of his head. Nobody was out there, or Nantuck, the malemute, would have raised a howl.

"I'll take care of that red-head, Roddy."

The tension went out of Roddy's muscles and suddenly he seemed weak and skinny, laying back on the blanket. McCord waited a while, then, with gentle hands, commenced to examine him. A big chunk had been ripped from one side of his parka. He lifted the garment. Beneath it, the mackinaw and wool shirt were both pierced and caked with blood. A side wound. Ragged and big. It had broken open and was bleeding.

One of those big, copper arrowheads would have left such a wound. No sign of one. The kid had probably plucked it out and thrown it away.

Nothing that could be used for bandage. McCord cursed himself for not bringing some from the main cache. He tore a fragment from his underwear, boiled it, used it to cleanse the wound. After that, all he could do was wait. Wait, and listen to the snap of the fire, the quiet sound of breathing, the ringing tick-tick of the watch inside his clothes.

He drew out the mouth organ, reconsidered, put it away. After a vast area of waiting, dawn commenced graying out the stars.

Now and then the kid would move suddenly, tossing the blanket, and each time the wound would start bleeding again. He was getting weaker. McCord could tell that by the way he breathed, and the grayish pallor that turned his skin the hue of the rabbit fur beside him.

McCord had seen men go out before. Too many. But not a fellow like Roddy. He always seemed like a kid to McCord no matter what his birth certificate said.

II

IT WAS NOON when he died. McCord left his body swung by babiche thongs from a spruce tree and started off, following the deep-furrowed trail that had been left in the snow .

McCord looked thinner, older. His eyes were slitted with a gray quartz hardness that showed the quality of the anger filling him.

It had been deliberate murder. Someone had lured the kid up-canyon. Probably the same one who killed Baillard. His words about a red-headed she-devil was only a dying man's delirium. No woman would have strength to draw the bowstring that drove those massive copper arrowheads.

The malemute kept whimpering behind him.

He fingered his rifle, hating to kill the poor, wounded animal. Instead he built a nest in the brush and coaxed the malemute in with a piece of pemmican. He went on then, alone.

Roddy's trail took him mile after mile through the canyon which widened to a level valley floor. The day, as all winter days, had been short. Twilight now. It was perceptibly warmer in the valley. Not even cold enough to make the snow beneath his webs creak. There was only the hissing sound as the bent-up tips kicked waves in loose snow.

He found the snow trampled over a considerable area. Bear tracks mixing with Roddy's. A malemute's body lay half buried in a snowbank. The wheel dog Nestoo. No tracks led to it. The malemute had apparently been flung there by the sweep of one mighty, killing blow.

A feathered shaft was trampled almost out of sight. He dug it out. The wood was big through as his thumb. He looked around for the arrowhead without locating it.

McCord was crouched on one knee, rifle resting in the bend of his right arm. He tensed, listened.

Frozen earth often has a drumlike quality that telegraphs movement over a considerable distance. It seemed to have that quality now.

He rocked back, hunkered on the heels of his moccasins. The rifle was up. He drew the baswood plug from its muzzle. An easy movement, done automatically, through long habit. His eyes were on the timber ahead of him trying to catch some sign of movement.

Nothing. No sound. Ahead of him, fifteen or twenty paces away, was a low, steep bank with level bench beyond. There was pounded snow up the bank, the trail made by bears when they left. Farther still, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards, rose the mountain.

He caught a flash of movement without actually locating it. His muscles responded like released spring steel sending him face foremost in the snow. The air made a fluttering sound over him. There was a thud, and something resembling the distant vibration of a fiddle string.

His rifle was still in his hand, but there'd been no chance of saving it from the snow. It was deep, muzzle first. He lay flat so the depth of snow concealed him.

He raised a trifle, enough to blink snow from his eyelashes. An arrow had passed over him and was driven in the trunk of a foot-thick spruce.

It was a big arrow, not long, but thick shafted. A tail of split hawk's feather had been attached without much skill. Only short-range accuracy would be possible with such an arrow. He knew that much about archery.

Fifty or seventy-five yards would be the limit. The head was sunk too deeply for him to tell much about it.

He lay still. Ten or fifteen seconds. No sound except the little creaks the snow made impacting under him.

He raised little by little, rested on elbows, then pulled himself forward rocking from one elbow to the other, rifle held in two mittened hands, his thumb and trigger finger through the slit of his right mitten touching icy metal.

There was buckbrush ahead. It offered concealment, but a tremble of its branches would reveal his position. He circled it through thinner snow.

He felt vibration again and lay still. Sound came abruptly. The grunt and snarl of animals. He had heard such sounds from

bears that were being goaded through the bars of their cage.

Brush was crashing from beyond the steep bank. The top of a young spruce pitched from side to side, showering snow from its branches. He sprang to his feet, set teeth in his mitten and drew it free of his shooting hand.

He expected another arrow, but none came. The bear appeared, a big silvertip, looking on him from the top of the bank.

It seemed to take a moment for the animal's little, cruel eyes to focus. Then he charged shoulder deep through snowbank, teeth bared, foam dribbling from the corners of his mouth. There was a collar around his neck with some steel links attached, and McCord was vaguely conscious of their jingle.

He waited, bent forward a trifle, rifle half raised to his shoulder. He'd fallen, driving the barrel in snow, and there'd been no chance to clean it out. He'd seen such barrels split like dandelion stems by the explosion of a high-velocity load, but there was no point in worrying about that now. He'd just have to take that chance.

THE grizzly rose on hind legs at the final moment, and McCord's finger pressed the trigger. Recoil felt good against his shoulder.

The bear was hit, but he came on, pink tinting the dribble at the corners of his mouth. The slug had passed through his throat. He was so close McCord was conscious of the moldy den-odor of his shaggy coat.

He fired again, aiming at the open mouth. The high-velocity bullet had an impact that smashed the animal over backward. He struck seedling spruce and tore them out by the roots with wild swings of his legs.

Someone was shouting back in the timber. McCord couldn't locate the sound. It was all mixed up with sounds of the dying grizzly.

A second bear had appeared. Larger than the first. Fifty paces away, turning along the brow of the bank. McCord sent a bullet, aiming for the heart. The bear turned over and slid snarling, back first, down the bank.

He still didn't know where the man was. Not his exact position, anyway. He was probably waiting for McCord to cross the sparsely wooded park that sloped away toward the river.

Instead, McCord ran forward, climbed through hip-deep snow, reached the bank's crest. It had more timber than he expected. A fire had gone through there once and afterward second-growth had sprung up covering charred deadfalls.

Deadfalls made the going hard, but they gave protection, too. He moved to the left, circling.

It was a hundred yards to the first, steep climb of the mountain. Slow going with snowshoes gone, but he reached it without drawing a shot.

He climbed for a hundred yards, then paused, waited. Timber made it hard to see. He reached inside his parka, found cartridges, fed them in the tubular magazine of his rifle.

It had been twilight when he found the trampled area where Roddy had been ambushed. Now stars were finding their way through the sky's murky grayness. The worst time of the day to see anything. A man's imagination was likely to see more than his eyes.

Darkness came by imperceptible degrees, giving the snow a purplish, starlight cast. An hour went by. His knees were getting stiff from crouching in the one position, so he stood up. He'd seen or heard nothing.

He climbed higher, found a game trail that followed a contour of the mountain. A sparrow with winter-fluffed feathers almost flew in his face and darted away among spruce branches.

Someone had alarmed the bird. He moved back from the trail and sat on the heels of his moccasins, rifle across his knees.

Steps were approaching. Moccasins. Soft, almost silent, a lynx-paw whisper in snow. They stopped. A couple of minutes passed without sound. Movement came almost beside him. He didn't realize anyone was so near. He waited, still crouched, the rifle brought up in his hands.

He angled the barrel around following a slim shadow, buckskin clad. It was a girl.

No more than two steps separated them, but she still did not see him. She moved a trifle closer, following the trail. Her move-

ments brought a whisper from the soft-rubbed buckskin she wore—there was no other sound. She stopped, turned her back toward him, and crouched forward, peering through an opening in timber at the starlit bottoms below.

Over her left arm she carried a short, powerful bow of babiche-bound wood. Around her slim waist was a thong, and on it a quiver of feather-tailed arrows.

McCord slowly lowered the rifle, sunk the butt of it in soft snow and removed his hand, letting the snow hold it upright. He rose to full height, moved towards her. He'd made no sound, but his closeness gave him away.

With a sudden exhalation, the girl spun around. But McCord was too close—already on the move. She had no chance of escaping. His hands darted, catching her arms from behind, above her elbows.

She twisted. The movement had a sharp strength he had not expected. Not from one so slim—not from a woman.

She was away from him, starting down the steep slope. A windfall blocked her way. Waist high. She tried to spring atop it, but he seized her again, hands on her waist. He dragged her back.

She spun and was facing him. One hand darted at his face. He felt the raking burn of sharp nails. The other hand flashed up from her waist. His eyes caught the star-glimmer on a hunting knife.

He was barely able to twist aside. The blade sang, its razor-keen edge slicing through the rough, cotton fabric of his parka.

A jerk of her hand told him the hilt had become tangled. She was trying to pull it free, but he twisted aside with a movement that tore the handle from her hand.

He once more seized her by the upper arms, and this time he bore down with all his hundred and ninety pounds of strength.

There was a lynx-cat's fury in her struggle. She tripped, fell down the steep slope, almost taking him with her. The windfall stopped them. He pinned her against it. He could feel the thin-twisting strength of her body. He pressed hard against her, driving the small of her back against the windfall, bending her until she was helpless.

She stood still. Her breath came rapidly through clenched teeth. He could feel the thud of her heart. He remembered holding captured forest creatures and feeling the same wild fright.

"Who are you?" he hissed.

He'd almost said *"what* are you?" Maybe he should have. He was bending her too far. He relaxed a trifle.

She responded instantly with head darting forward, teeth bared. She would have sunk them into his flesh if he had been an instant slower.

"You she-devil!" he said, unwittingly using the same words Roddy had used in describing her.

She had twisted away from the windfall, pitched backward toward the ground trying to roll free. He was on one knee, still holding her arms. It was like having hold of a hundred and ten pounds of bobcat.

The struggle lasted for two or three furious minutes. He had no way of telling. At last she stopped and lay still.

"Who are you?" he repeated.

She said something. A word or two. He couldn't understand. It was a tongue he had never heard before. Indian maybe. Yet this girl was no Indian. Even in the dimness of starlight he could see the flaming red of her hair, the whiteness of her skin.

She was eighteen or nineteen. Slim, supple, beautiful. Nothing on her head. Only the masses of red hair to protect it from the zero cold of early winter. She was dressed in soft deerskin, a robe belted around the waist and falling short of her knees. Protecting her feet and legs were high moccasins. The skins had been willow cured, and he could still smell the smoke that hung on them.

With a quick movement he released one of her arms and twisted the other behind her. It was unexpected, not giving her time to try for escape. He drew a handcuff from his belt and closed it on the wrist. Connected to the cuff was a fine steel chain that was in turn linked to McCord's belt.

He expected her to fight against the cuff. She merely looked down at her wrist without making a movement.

The knife was still caught in his parka. He freed the tangled hilt. It had a bone handle and thin, high-tempered blade of Swedish steel. The Hudson's Bay traders had brought such knives to the country, but that was before McCord's day. He touched

the edge. It was honed sharp enough for shaving.

He slid it in his belt. The bow had fallen from the girl's arm and become trampled in the snow. He handed it back, but she did not seem to notice.

"Want it?" he asked, watching her eyes to tell if she understood. No telling.

She was standing now, eyes on him. The eyes gave warning. Her hand whipped up with an arrow whisked from the quiver. He grabbed and broke the shaft.

He flung it aside and tried to jerk the quiver from her waist. The thong held, and the strength of his movement sent her sprawling to the ground.

She was on her feet, trying to dart away evidently forgetting the chained handcuff. McCord set himself, letting her hit the end. It snapped her back, and this time he got the quiver.

He looked at one of the arrows. The copper tip was drawn out slim, pointed sharp as porcupine quill. Aside from the material they were made of, these heads bore little resemblance to the massive one he'd left back at Buchanan's. He felt better, having this indication that the girl was not the killer.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

It was foolish, asking her questions. If she understood, she had no intention of letting on.

Something itched his face. He ran his hand up. It came away smeared with blood. That's where her fingernails had dug.

He looked at her, drawn away at the length of her arm and the steel chain. She had a wild beauty that appealed to him. An elemental loveliness. The blood kept oozing, and he kept wiping it away.

"I wonder what in the devil I do now?" he mused.

McCORD stood, thinking it over. Now that he had her, what was he going to do.

It would be a thousand-mile trip along the freezing river to headquarters, and no charge to lodge against her on his arrival. Nothing for him to do but send her on to the welfare division. It would be best for him to hold her for a little while—three or four days. Take her back to cache camp, maybe, and wait for someone to stage a rescue. Or, if no one came, he could let her escape, and perhaps lead him to the killer's lair back in the mountains.

"Come along!" he said.

She leaned against the windfall, watching him with quick, intelligent eyes, making no move until the chain tightened on her wrist. He stepped aside, and she stopped, refusing to go ahead. He gestured with his rifle, but she merely stood there, her lips seeming to smile a very little.

"Ah, you spitfire!" McCord said, his voice taking the old Irish music again. "But I'll take you in with me one way or another. Do you understand that?"

She was still leaning against the fallen tree, elbows behind her, narrowed eyes watching him. There was a defiant curl to her little mouth, and a defiance in the way her breasts and shoulders tilted up from her slim waist. Her buckskin blouse was made with thong fasteners which failed to bring it quite together. She didn't seem to be dressed very well for that kind of weather, even though it was only November with the strong cold still a month or so away. Apparently she wore nothing but the buckskin.

"You'll come or I'll carry you," he said. "Do you understand that, you red mountain-cat?"

Her face gave no hint of understanding. She simply watched with a feline intentness. Her lips were drawn thin, revealing her even, white teeth.

He went ahead, and she followed. He kept to the mountain a mile or more, and then descended to the river ice.

The girl walked behind willingly enough, keeping just to the end of the chain without tightening it. He was on guard, always keeping her in the tail of his eye, knowing well enough that there was no surrender in her, that she was merely waiting her chance, that she would do anything, even kill him to escape.

The knife was under his parka. He got to thinking about it and sheathed it beside his own hunting blade, ramming it firmly so it wedged in the scabbard. His revolver was in sight, strapped around his waist, but it had a snap-down flap over its butt that would delay her.

He paused where Roddy's body had been lifted high in a spruce by babiche thongs. The girl didn't see him for a mo-

ment. McCord stood, looking up, until her gaze followed his. She screamed and jerked back, forgetting the chain.

"Who did it?" McCord shouted.

She was on one knee in the snow, looking at him. There was terror rather than anger in her eyes. Somehow it made him feel better—like proof that she had human feeling after all.

"Who did it?" he repeated, this time speaking French.

She shook her head and spoke a couple of syllables that had no meaning in them. He asked again, but it did no good.

The malemute, Nantuck, came whining from his nest, acting better now that the pemmican was inside him. His hind quarters were in bad shape from the blow he'd taken, but malemutes die hard.

Working slowly, handicapped by the chain still clipped to his belt, McCord made a roll of the rabbitskin blankets and slung them over his shoulders. Some of the fight seemed to be shocked from the girl. Looking at Roddy had done that to her.

He spoke with the old softness in his voice. "Maybe you had nothing to do with it, girl. And if you did, it's likely you knew no better."

He smiled at her, but there was no change in her eyes. No response. There was something about McCord's blunt, Irish smile that usually softened people, but this girl was an exception.

"Come along," he said.

New snow was sifting from a gray sky, hiding most of the dawn. Wolves had been around the cache, but all the supplies were drawn high, beyond reach.

McCord got down tea, bacon and self-rising flour, and cooked breakfast.

"Eat?" he asked, sliding a plate of biscuit and bacon toward the girl.

He knew she was hungry by the expression in her eyes, but the tinplate sat on snow with cold congealing the melted bacon fat without her making a move toward it.

McCord said nothing. He merely ate his portion, swabbed up grease with a fragment of biscuit, drank tea. When he cleaned up half an hour later, the food was still untouched.

She sat with one knee pressed in snow, looking at him. It seemed she had no feeling for the cold. He scraped up her plate, and fed the malemute.

"You'll come around to eating one of these days, my darlin'," he said.

Snow was coming harder, slanting in from north-east. It eddied in gray clouds around the spruces, making their high tops look foggy and remote, shutting out all but brief glimpses of the canyon crests. A few hours of such a storm would make it hard for anyone to follow their trail, but the thought did not greatly bother McCord. That bear-training killer up-canyon had probably already located the camp, and if not, a little woodsmoke would turn the trick. That night or the next he expected visitors.

There was more chain in camp. He joined a second piece, securing it with a small padlock, then fastened the end to a spruce by means of a second padlock. After that he was free to move around, to lay in a supply of firewood, and cut spruce branches for a lean-to. It was dark and time for supper when the lean-to was finished.

Once more he filled the girl's plate and slid it within her reach. He ate, taking his time. Her food was still untouched. He took his axe and went out for more firewood. Returning, fifteen minutes later, he found the plate empty.

He grinned at her.

"Good?" he asked.

No answer. Not that he was expecting any. He fumbled to load a stub briar pipe from a store of loose tobacco in the pocket of his mackinaw. He sat on his heels, laid a coal on the pipe bowl, and puffed, letting smoke blow away on the blizzard.

"You're not fooling me, child," he said in his easy, conversational way. "Not fooling me a bit. You know well enough every word that I'm saying."

"No!"

THE word came unexpectedly—as unexpectedly for the girl as for him. He smiled with the pipestem clamped in his strong teeth.

"There's no need in fighting against me, child. I mean you no harm. Only the one who kills from ambush—he's the only one I would harm. And you like it no better than I—that killing. I saw that in your eyes back in the valley. Tell me, girl—who is it kills men with the big arrows, and

has with him the trained grizzlies on chains?"

She stood up and backed away. The chain was dragging through snow, but she'd forgotten it. It tightened on her wrist, and in sudden surprise and fury she flung herself back, hitting the end, and the sharp strength of her movement tore skin and a quick dribble of blood ran down the inside of her hand.

"And now look what you've done!" McCord said with genuine sorrow in his voice. He didn't like chaining her like a wild beast, but there was no other course. "It'll do you no good, girl, to fight the chain. Or me. I mean you no harm. All I want is that you take me to the man-beast or whoever it is who killed the lad. Do that, and by the honor of the McCords, I'll set you free."

She kept the chain tight. It was dark, but firelight struck brightly across her, and he could see the rapid beat of pulse in her throat.

"Look at me, girl. Do I look like I'm lying to you?"

No answer. There had been that single syllable—"No." Nothing more.

"What a strange creature you are!" he said, once more sitting on his heels, puffing smoke from the stub pipe. "What a strange, lovely creature. Has any man got around to telling you that?—how lovely you are? Aye, they have that. Even in this forgotten corner of God's universe, they have!"

Her wrist had stopped bleeding, but he knew by the way she held it that the cold steel cuff was causing her pain. Nothing he dared do for the moment. He didn't want to start her fighting it again.

In clear weather, there is no winter darkness in the North, only a lack of sun, with twilight bright enough for a man to read. But on this night, storm laid a thick blackness.

McCord spread one of the rabbitskin blankets on packed snow inside the lean-to.

"There girl!" he said.

She had moved around a little to watch him. He gestured for her to come inside, but she did not move.

"You sleep here, girl."

He decided she wouldn't go in as long as he was there. He moved back and stood, the slanting spruce branches so low he had to bend his head. To his surprise she crept in, reached the back where the lean-to roof was scarcely three feet high, and sat with legs drawn under her, bare knees sunk in the deep, warm softness of the rabbitskin.

He'd built the lean-to facing away from the wind, and the fire in front of it reflected warmth. Flames struck her hair, turning it a bright copper. She shook her hair, sending it in waves over her shoulders. It enveloped her in its thick coils, falling to the blanket she was sitting on, making her seem tiny and fragile. It seemed to be a thoughtless movement but her hair, descending over her like that, made her more beautiful than ever.

Her eyes had seemed small—slitted and green. Cruel. But they were not like that now. Firelight and shadow made them look dark, large-pupiled. Heat had collected in that far end of the lean-to, and working through her scant, buckskin clothing, it made her shiver—the first hint he'd had that she even felt the cold.

McCord bent to one knee. "Let me see your wrist."

She was still and intent, making no move away, letting him feel her hand. The blood still smeared at his touch. He turned her hand over. It was warm and soft with the roundness in wrist and fingers that indicated muscles of perfect development. He worked the cuff up a couple of inches, revealing the cut half circling her wrist. Not deep—roughened skin more than anything.

He got up and opened the first-aid kit, finding bandage and adhesive. He warmed the adhesive in the fire, brought it in and tore strips which he applied over the bandage. She made no move at all—no sound except for the quick whisper of breath passing through her small nostrils.

He finished and slid the cuff back down. He glanced up and met her eyes. All sign of hatred and fear had left them for that moment. In its place was something like wonder, as though she had received an unexpected kindness, the first in all her life.

He smiled, recalling a story of the lad who pulled a thorn from the lion's foot.

He remained for a while on one knee, beside her. Her shoulder poked through masses of hair, close to him. He laid his hand on the shoulder with a gentle movement. She seemed to stop breathing, then

suddenly twisted away, flinging herself on hip and outflung arms in the corner of the lean-to.

"It's time for you to go, McCord!" he said with laughter in his voice.

Outside, he heaped wood on the fire.

III

McCORD dug out a hole in the snow for his own blanket and lay down with the storm seeming impersonal and remote above the soft thickness of fur. The chain passed close to him, and for a while he could hear tiny, tinkling vibrations along it, then they stopped. He lay for half an hour, and then rose silently and stood near the front of the lean-to. Her breathing came soft and regular from inside. He added wood to the fire and returned to his blanket. A two-inch-deep layer of snow had already settled on it. He slid in, and a moment later was asleep.

He awoke. Nothing had alarmed him. He tossed aside the blanket with its load of new snow, reached, laid fingers on the cold chain.

No movement. It was still dark, but a certain quality about the darkness told him dawn was not far distant. The wind seemed to be a little less, but snow spun so thickly it was hard for a man to breathe. During the night it had heaped over the lean-to, softening its outline. In front, steam rose from the round, dark circle where the fire had melted.

He looked inside, and the chain tinkled, telling him the girl had awakened.

Coals still burned on the undersides of the big wood he'd stacked on the fire. It took only a moment to get flames to crackling. By that time the girl was at the front of the lean-to watching him.

"Hungry?" he asked.

She said something—two syllables he could not understand.

"What?"

She repeated it, and some more. A peculiar, guttural tongue. Not Cree, or any of the Indian languages of the Three Rivers.

He noticed she was smiling a very little, like the day before. Sometimes he got the idea she was making a fool of him, and that she would suddenly emerge like a butterfly from the crysalis with an accent cultivated by Madame Bovard's *Ecole de Quebec,* and unroll a diploma six feet long.

They ate, and afterward there was nothing to do except watch the storm, and feed the fire.

Many times during the day McCord would look up and see the girl's eyes on him. All their original fierceness seemed to have melted from them at such unguarded instants. Sometimes she seemed curious, eager, and her lips would be parted in something resembling a smile.

As afternoon grayed off toward dusk he drew out his mouth organ and played.

The girl sat in front of the lean-to with feet drawn under her, listening, intent and silent.

There was one piece she seemed to enjoy more than the others—a bit of old French song that had been popular with voyageurs since the Nor'west Fur Company sent its first brigades to the great woods beyond Fort William almost two centuries before—*"La Belle Rose."*

He played it over and over, pretending not to watch as the girl closed her eyes and rocked to and fro, humming the air with him. He played softer, cupping the harmonica in his palms, until the reed was dim accompaniment to the wind-music howling through high spruce branches. And in little snatches of song, the girl's voice came to him—a lovely, untrained voice, sweet as spring birdsong. She was humming, and as she hummed, her lips formed words,

La belle rose
Qui pandait au rosier blanc . . .

McCord had been asleep in the soundless depths of snow and blanket. He awoke suddenly, feeling the sparkle of cold flakes on his skin and started to sit up. He stopped. The point of a knife was burning the skin of his throat, just over his jugular vein.

His elbows were propped behind him, lifting his shoulders a few inches from the bed. The knife pressed harder, forcing him back. He was pinned and helpless. Only a slight movement, a little extra pressure, and the keen blade would finish him.

The girl! Somehow she had found the knife without waking him. He wondered if the chain was still on her wrist.

It seemed like a long time, with flakes veering in from the stormy darkness, melting against his skin. Perhaps it was no more than eight or ten seconds. He could hear her breathing—the warm press of her weight against his side.

His lips formed words, and he spoke softly, sounding almost amused, "Well, girl! And what now?"

She did not answer. He could feel the knife point transmitting little, recurrent waves of nervousness from her tense arm.

He said, "You want the key, I suppose."

"Yes," she whispered.

"I'll get it."

"Lie still."

She could speak English. He knew all the time that she could.

The knife was still pressed, its point stinging his throat. He could feel her hand groping beneath the blanket. It seemed to take her a long time to locate the key-chain. He could have seized her hand, twisted her aside—only it would have taken such a little pressure of the knife point—such a little pressure.

SHE found the key chain. There were half a dozen keys in the bunch, and it took a long time for her to find the right one. She fit it in the cuff; there was a crisp, snapping sound as it unlocked. He felt the blade tremble hard, piercing his skin.

"Careful, girl!"

"I should kill you!" she spoke in a fierce whisper. He could feel the tenseness as her body lay across him. "I should kill you. Promise to leave here, or I will kill you!"

"Why do you want me to leave?"

"Promise, or I'll kill you!"

"I'll leave." He didn't say when.

She moved suddenly, taking the knife away, lifting her body off him. The cuff and chain dropped with a jingle deadened by snow. Out in the storm McCord could hear the malemute whimper.

A second later he realized she was gone.

He got up, fumbling to tie the lashings of his muclucs. The skin of his throat burned as though the knife still pressed on it. It had drawn some blood.

She could have killed him so easily. Two days before she wouldn't have hesitated. And yet she had spared him.

"McCord!" he muttered. "McCord, you devil among mouth organ players, you!"

The malemute barked for a while, and then came muzzling across the rabbitskin looking for him.

"Here boy!" The animal pointed his head up-canyon, barking to show that the girl was gone. "It's all right, boy."

Her tracks were deep-furrowed, but the storm had started to fill them. It wouldn't take long. Two or three hours would make it hard to follow.

He ate cold leavings, made a wolfpack of blanket and grub. By then the better part of an hour had passed. It was about right. He didn't want to trail too closely.

The prints led him straight to the canyon wall, climbed among jackpine timber, turned and followed the depression of a game trail.

Without warning the tracks disappeared.

It was hard picking them up by the dim light of approaching dawn. Snow had been brushed from a low-hanging branch. A reef of basaltic rock poked to the surface a short distance away. She'd evidently leaped from branch to reef and followed it, climbing to other exposed rocks farther along the steep wall.

Clever. Clever as a carcajou. He had no intention of keeping on the trail. In a storm like this it would be a matter of luck with the odds weighted against him.

He climbed the canyon wall, gaining greater and greater altitude. Dawn filtered through uncertain and gray—a shadowless dawn seeming to come as much from earth as from sky. Once in a while the shifting air currents would break a hole in the storm to reveal an area of valley bottom.

He sat in the shelter of a ledge among dry pine needles, using binoculars during the brief intervals that he could see, and spending the rest of his time cleaning mist from their lenses.

An hour passed with the storm at last showing signs of letting up. Still warm—still above zero. It would turn colder when the snow stopped.

He put the glasses down to rest his eyes, and at the same moment glimpsed movement far below. The malemute sat up with hackles bristling, but a word from McCord made him settle back on tense legs.

The girl. She had appeared unexpectedly from a thick clump of jackpine and

was running, springing from point to point along a briefly exposed edge of stone.

McCord watched through the glasses, smiling a little. She disappeared and came in sight again climbing farther along the mountain.

Snow billowed, but the blizzard was losing its fury. Later the sun made a pale white circle skirting the broken horizon to the south. Far up-valley, billows of mist hung to the face of crags.

McCord waited an hour, then, marking the spot where she had last appeared, he took a shortcut across alternating rock and snow. Her tracks descended to the bottoms, and were joined there by the oval prints of bearpaw moccasins, lightly snowed over and probably pressed there about dawn.

Long experience had taught McCord to guess a man's weight by the appearance of such prints, and he knew that this man was extremely heavy—perhaps heavy as Big Bateese from the Yellowknife, the biggest man McCord had ever seen in the North.

He followed, skirting timber. Woodsmoke was sharp in the air. From a knoll he looked down on a cabin.

It was a low building of logs, made in two wings, one at right angles to the other. The roof was low, and fresh drifts reaching from ground almost to eave made it seem even lower. Someone had broken trail uphill to a deep stand of timber.

No one came or went. He descended, slowed by his lack of snowshoes.

Huge timber there. Bigger than any he'd seen north of the Athabasca. The stars were out, lighting the snow with sparkling beauty deep and undisturbed. A dog howled. Dog or wolf. Nantuck lifted his nose to answer.

"Quiet!" McCord hissed through his teeth.

Not far now. A snow-covered lake bed made an oval circle at his left with snowshoe tracks making a dark line across it.

No wind now. Smoke from the cabin chimney ascended in a straight column, making a gray streak through stars. The cabin was no more than a hundred and fifty yards distant.

He started across a little strip of clearing. A clump of brush stood in the middle. It looked dry and brittle as though long dead. The snow had a peculiar vibration when he put weight down. Alarm ran through him. He tried to retreat, but hip-deep snow held him. He heard frosty twigs cracking like a cluster of tiny rifle shots beneath his feet—was conscious of the ground collapsing under him.

HE FELL into a well of blackness. The fall ended abruptly with pain like hot iron stabbing his thigh.

He tried to rise. Something held him. He moved his hands. Hard-driven stakes pressed in on both sides.

He lay still after the first moment, merely trying to get his bearings. Darkness was complete except for a ragged fragment of sky visible straight above. That was the hole left by his falling. He was lying in a pit fifteen or twenty feet deep, its bottom covered by pointed stakes. Through good luck he'd fallen between them, though one had made a shallow wound in his thigh.

He groped, and found that the stakes were about three feet high, set solidly, pointed sharply and rubbed down to a glaze of smoothness. He pulled himself to a sitting position, stood.

The opening was still too high to reach. He moved, threading his way among pointed pegs, groping for the wall. Instead he found a pillar—a tree trunk used to support that section of the deadfall roof.

Nantuck had been whimpering through the hole above. Then he started to bark, a sharp, insistent sound. Other malemutes were barking a quarter-mile or so away.

McCord cursed him, trying to make him stop, but the dog only barked more loudly.

He climbed the pillar until his head touched the roof. The roof was constructed of cross-laid sticks. He pulled at them, starting a stream of dirt that ran across his hands and face.

The sticks were small, but woven into place and held firmly by the weight of sod and snow. He tore his fingers trying to get them apart.

It was useless. He wrapped his legs and lifted with shoulders bent against the roof. The weight of snow was too great.

Movement telegraphed itself across the roof. He'd been aware of the malemute, and now there was something else—a heavy, slow step.

Memory of the grizzlies came to his

mind. He hung to the pillar by legs and one arm while his free hand unsnapped the flap covering his revolver butt.

Nantuck's bark had risen till it had a sharp, vicious quality. A man's voice came in a wordless mumble.

He heard a thump mixed with twang like a bass-fiddle string. Nantuck snarled —and there was abrupt silence.

McCord knew that one of those massive arrowheads had struck the poor animal down.

Light appeared, lining the deadfall hole. A flame slowly descended. It was a grease-dip in a wooden bowl, suspended in a cradle of three strings. Light from it fell strongly on pointed stakes below and then rapidly diminished, eaten up by earthy darkness.

The pit was larger than McCord imagined — actually a trench twenty-five or thirty feet across, extending in other direction farther than the grease flame reached.

He heard the man's movements above— little, creaking sounds from the deadfall roof, the wheezing of his breath.

Time went by with the grease lamp still swinging midway between stakes and roof. At last a guttural voice,

"You—down there." He waited, then spoke again, "You! Come! You hear what I say?"

McCord answered, "Sure I hear. And be careful. I have a gun."

"Yah. You drop gun." An arm appeared—a massive arm, reddish brown covered with rusty blonde hair. The fingers were banana thick and blunt, dirty, with nails hanging to them thick and white like buttons. "You see my arm?"

"I see it."

"You come on. I boost you up. You put away gun, and then I boost you up. You put away gun or I kill you down there."

He did not speak broken English. His English was merely elemental, spoken with a halting selection of words as though months and years without using them had made him almost forget.

"You come," he repeated.

McCORD lowered himself to the floor and threaded his way among pointed stakes. His left thigh had bled and his pants stuck to the wound. He drew his revolver and let it swing, hidden by his right hip. For a few seconds there was no sound except the whisper of his moccasins as they pressed dry twigs and needles that had sifted down and were strewn across the earthen floor.

The arm bent and started to withdraw.

"Keep your arm in sight!" McCord barked.

The arm jerked from view as though attached to a released spring. McCord twisted, springing back, avoiding closely spaced pegs. He was at point blank range, but the movement saved him. The shaft made a humming sound. Its massive copper head cut his loose-hanging parka skirt tugging as it cut through. It struck a stake, and the stake split as though from the blow of an axe.

McCord angled the pistol, squeezed the trigger. Flame sprang from the shadow beyond his hip. The bullet's course was lined by a streak of burning powder. He could feel the man's heavy movements in flinging himself across the roof.

The grease-dip was still burning. McCord crouched just beyond view of the roof hole. Concussion still rang in his ears, and his nostrils tingled from the odor of burnt cordite.

The roof kept trembling for a considerable time. Here and there dirt was running through sticks, and a little tingle of sifted snow was in the air. Silence for a minute or two. The man returned. McCord sensed he was poised by the hole. The revolver was ready, aimed with his eye down the sights.

The man was dropping something to the floor. Arrmloads of dry spruce twigs with brittle needles still intact. The grease dip was lifted—dropped.

Its flame sputtered and spread through the dry heap. A moment later, with flames rolling high, an armload of green boughs thumped down, smothering the open flames, creating masses of lung-constricting smoke.

McCord holstered the revolver. Enough light came through the smoke to reveal nearby stakes. He ran, doing a sliding, balancing step between the stakes, and sprang, resting a moccasin toe on one of their tips.

He felt a sharp burn of pain as it pierced the sole, but momentum carried

him forward and he sprang, setting fingers in woven sticks at the edge of the hole.

He was bellying up through loose snow with the roof crumbling beneath him. A couple of spruce poles had been laid across the snow. He got hold of one, pulled himself to a crouch feeling the good, chill air of outside around him.

He sensed the man at his back, tried to turn. He was raking the revolver from its holster. He started to rock back, to fling himself aside knowing at the same instant he was too late.

He had no real sensation of being struck. The night suddenly became very bright—like a meteor suspended, blinding his eyes. He seemed to be suspended himself with the ground nowhere while the glare grew brighter and brighter before suddenly gyrating off into distance.

He came to with his head spinning and an aching ring like a hatpin thrust through eardrums. It took him a moment to realize where he was.

He was sitting with one hand sunk deeply in the snow behind him. From the hole, grayish smoke was still billowing. He'd been unconscious for only a few seconds.

He started to get up, but something stabbed his back. He turned his head. A huge, buckskin-clad man was hunched over, arrow fixed and drawn in the string of a massive bow, the point rammed between his shoulders.

"So it's you," McCord said, making his voice sound easy and casual.

"Yah," the man grunted. He was blinking his bovine eyes. He did it slowly, as though something about his eyeballs made it difficult to remove the lids once they were closed. "Yah. How did you know it was me?"

"Everybody knows you."

"Ha!" It pleased him. His mouth opened, revealing brown and broken teeth. "They all talkin' about me, huh?"

McCord nodded and sat crosslegged in the snow. Every movement sent pain through his brain, but nothing about his blunt, good-humored face showed it.

He looked the fellow over. He was about twenty-five, maybe thirty. Often it's hard to guess the ages of those big fellows. They seem to retain certain immaturities until middle years. He wore a cap of wolverine fur on his head, and beneath it his burlap-covered hair strung down to his shoulders. His face was blunt, the jaw loose with a habit of drooping open. His buckskins, unlike the girl's, were not soft rubbed, but worn raw or with little tanning. They were blackened from smoke and grease and a rank, musty bear-den odor hung to him.

His eyes showed he was thinking of something. Dull-witted though he obviously was, his eyes showed a degree of animal cunning.

"You're mounted policeman," he said.

"Yes."

"I kill mounted policemen."

"But you're not going to kill me."

IT TOOK the fellow a while to get a laugh started, and then it was chiefly massive shakes of his body. When he was through he let his jaw sag a little more than usual. "No. I ain't going to kill you. Of course I don't kill you."

He rocked back, pulling the arrow an inch further. The bow, McCord could see, was not made of wood. It was of horn cut in strips, fitted and bound with intricate wrappings of thin-rubbed babiche thong. No doubt most strong men could have bent that bow, but to keep it bent, casually, for as long as this fellow did . . .

McCord went on in his quiet voice, "No, because I came a long way just to tell you something."

"Me?"

"Of course."

The bow relaxed just a little. The arrow had a massive, copper head identical to the one at Buchanan's.

He said, "What you come to tell me?"

"About *her.*"

"Who?"

McCord laughed. He got himself to one knee. The revolver was gone from its holster. He'd dropped it somewhere. It wasn't on top of the snow. He tried to find the little mark which would show where it went through the snow's soft surface.

The fellow rose his voice in a bellow, "Who?" He spread his legs and bulged chest and shoulders in an attitude to make McCord fear his anger and strength.

"You know who."

The fingers holding the bow had commenced to twitch. Behind them the eyes

were slitted and cruel as a carcajou's.

McCord asked, "What's your name?"

"You know me all right. All mounted policemen know me." He twisted the corners of his mouth. "Me Ruck! Ruck!" He shouted it in a voice coarse enough to match his brutal appearance. Then his next words came in a hiss, "How you know you find me when you don't even know my name?"

Ruck. McCord's memory reached far back for that name. Volney Ruck! That was the man. He remembered the police record of a timber camp roustabout named Volney Ruck who had beaten two men to death down in one of the Manitoba camps. Afterward in the chase a Mountie named Demster had been shot. That had been long before when McCord was constable headquartered at Battleford, and the chase had been up to the boys in Prince Albert District.

"Volney Ruck!" he said, looking in the man's face.

Calling him by the full name flattered his vanity.

"Ha! You know me all right. I bet you all policemen scared of Ruck. I kill policemen."

"But not me." McCord was fighting for time. He was steady enough now. Ruck was standing on one of the spruce poles. If he could be made to step off that, the deadfall's fragile roof would never hold him. If McCord could only make that drawn arrow move aside for an instant . . . "You won't kill me, Ruck. Because I've got something to tell you."

"You said—about woman."

"Did I?"

"Yes. About woman." He shook bow and arrow, ramming the point at McCord's chest. "You know where she was?"

This anger was a little more than he had bargained for. Ruck went on,

"She my woman. Nella, she my woman!"

Nella. That was the girl's name. By the way Ruck spoke he knew there was only the one—no other woman in all this giant's universe.

"Your woman," McCord said.

Ruck nodded his head in a gesture that snapped his unkempt hair back and forth. "My woman!" He drew the arrow back and back until its head was almost even with his thumb and internal strain sent little, popping sounds through the bow. "Maybe Nella was with you?"

"Ruck!" a man's sharp, incisive voice was calling. "Ruck!"

Ruck paused, his massive strength exactly balanced by the strength of the bow. Three or four seconds passed. It seemed like a lot longer. He exhaled slowly and relaxed the bow a little.

"Ruck!" the sharp voice called again. "I heard you out there. I heard somebody shoot. Answer me, damn you!"

"Yah!" he muttered. "I'm here."

Someone was coming through the timber, walking spread-legged on short, broad snowshoes.

He said, "You have somebody in the deadfall?"

"He got out."

"Got away?" The man's voice rose on a saw-tooth note of anger. "You mean—"

"He's here."

The bow made a series of snapping sounds as it relaxed, but behind it Ruck's face looked more animal-vicious than ever. His eyes roved between McCord and the man approaching on snowshoes.

"Where are you?" the man asked. "Damn you, keep talking. You know I can't find you otherwise."

"Here—here—here—" Ruck chanted.

The man seemed to be blind, or nearly so. He was carrying a rifle in one hand, a long staff in the other. He kept the staff swinging ahead of him, brushing the surface of the snow, groping a way through spruce trees.

"Deadfall!" Ruck muttered truculently.

The man paused, not venturing to cross the roof of the deadfall. He was away from timber shadow, and starlight revealed the bold, high-beaked lines of his face. Fifty years old—or a little more. A rangy man with high, broad shoulders. Like Ruck and the girl, he was dressed only in the skins of animals.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Mounted policeman," Ruck said thickly.

"And you were going to kill him without letting me know?" The man's voice had a long, steely wire of anger in it. "Damn you, answer me! Were you intending to kill him without bringing him to the house?"

Ruck muttered his answer beneath his

breath. McCord could see the expression of mixed fear and hatred on his face.

"Bring him here!"

Ruck jabbed with the arrow, and McCord crossed the spruce poles. The man tilted his head back trying to see from eyeballs that looked blank and milky as twin mushroom buttons.

"Why did you come here?"

"Are you used to having mounted policemen answer that question? We rove this North country pretty wide and we've been doing it for quite a while."

"Mounted policemen!" The man laughed—a dry, brittle sound. "Yes, I see it in you. The same old pride! The pride of a trained dog that has learned to hunt and kill with the pack. The Mounted hasn't changed." Then he asked, "You came here looking for Ruck?"

"Perhaps."

"Hear that, Ruck?" he demanded, turning to the giant. "See now that I was right when I said their human hound-pack would follow you here someday? And when we kill this one, there'll be another, and after him, one more, and so on until your name is off their books. I'd be wise if I gave him your carcass now."

Ruck did not answer. He merely looked, hunched and stubborn. He reminded McCord of an ox, a vicious ox, born killer but lacking the courage to make that last step and gore his master.

"Bring him to the house!"

The man turned, swinging his staff in front of him, and commenced fumbling his way back through timber.

Ruck came close, ramming the arrow point to McCord's spine.

"Go. You hear him? Go!"

IV

A PATH had been tramped through snow leading to the cabin's front door. McCord went inside.

The room was long and low ceilinged, dimly lighted by flames which sprang from a heap of twisty knots in a stone fireplace. The floor was made of poles supported on crosslogs. They gave springy, uneven footing, like a man would get from thinly frozen muskeg. The room was almost bare—only a few axe-hewn furnishings—a rough table, a bench, some puncheon chairs. The skin of a silvertip bear was spread in front of the fireplce, and light, catching the tips of its hairs, made it look gray as wood ashes.

The hawk-faced old man had crossed the room and stood stiffly at one side of the fireplace, his rifle leaned against the wall.

"What's your name?" he asked.

McCord told him. "And yours?"

"Villon. Camille Villon."

McCord hadn't expected such a ready answer. Unexpectedly, Villon let out with that magpie laugh of his again—a peculiar laugh which sounded like it had become dry through disuse.

"The name means nothing to you, I suppose?"

"There are lots of Villons in Canada."

"Yes, I suppose. Lots of Villons. A man gets to forgetting those things in the woods. Here it gets so a man thinks he's the one important creature of his kind in all God's universe."

"You've been here a long time?"

"Yes. A lifetime. My second lifetime."

He kept peering, trying to make out McCord's face. He dug the fire with a stick and got flames to rolling.

"Step over by the fire. I'd like to see your face."

McCord did so, letting Villon study him for a considerable time.

"I'm almost blind," he said. "Next winter, perhaps, I'll not be able to see at all."

"You should leave this valley and go outside. A doctor would take those cataracts off and you'd be able to see again."

He jerked his head as though such an idea were ridiculous. "Do you know how long it's been since I was 'outside' as you call it?" He stopped. "What year is this?"

McCord told him. "Then it's been sixteen years."

"Where do you trade? At Buchanan's?"

"Trade? Nowhere!"

McCord had guessed that. He lived here, with the girl and that hulking Volney Ruck cut off from all except accidental visitors such as prospectors, a trapper like Paul Baillard, or a mountie

who came searching for his murderer.

"You think I'm a madman, don't you?" Villon asked, smiling slightly.

"All men are a little insane—at least in this country."

"We are individuals in this country!" He changed his tone abruptly, "Why did you come?"

"To look for a murderer."

"Ah!" His milky eyes groped beyond McCord, looking for Volney Ruck who was standing by the open door, massive and silent. "Was somebody killed?"

"Two men. A trapper named Paul Baillard a month ago. His body was found in the muskegs. And three nights ago, my assistant, Special Constable Fischer."

"The muskegs are a long distance from here."

"Perhaps. But the Special Constable was murdered no more than ten miles down the valley."

"And you think I did it?"

McCord jerked his head at Ruck. "We both know who did it."

"And you're here after him."

"I'm placing him under arrest."

Villon laughed. There was a touch of admiration in it. He spoke, "Ruck, come here!"

Ruck shuffled forward. He looked bigger than ever inside the house. Like one of the bears he had with him down the valley. He paused three or four steps away, filling that end of the room with musty bear-den odor. An unintelligible word came from his throat.

"Do you hear that, Ruck? Did you hear what the mounted policeman just said? He is placing you under arrest. He's going to take you outside and hang you."

Ruck sucked in his breath. It made a gurgling sound deep in his massive throat. Then he muttered some more of his unintelligible jargon.

"Speak so the mountie can understand you."

"I kill him!" He extended his hands, slowly closed them. It made his knuckles pop, one after another. "With hands I'll break his damn back."

Villon went on. He evidently enjoyed playing on the brute-man's emotions. "Maybe he'll take you back to Quill Lake so those timber-jack friends of yours can watch the hanging."

It seemed to take a while for the thought to set itself in Ruck's brain. Then rage spread across his face, deforming it. He drew an arrow from his quiver, fitted it in the string, drew the bow . . .

"Ruck!"

The arrow was still notched.

"Ruck!" Villon screamed, angry to find the man so unwilling to obey.

The voice stopped Ruck, but he still kept the arrow pointed at McCord's chest.

VILLON spun around, reaching for his rifle. It was an old-time Winchester. A 45-90, perhaps. He lifted it, swung its heavy, octagonal barrel. Ruck saw it coming. There was plenty of time to escape the blow if he'd wanted to. He didn't. He merely stood as he was, spread-legged, and took heavy steel across the shoulder. No change of expression. No sign of pain.

Then slowly, as though his body were some massive mechanism that needed oiling, he obeyed, sliding the bow back on his forearm, putting the arrow away. He backed slowly until he was once more by the door.

"He'll turn on you sometime, like a catamount you've raised on a chain."

"I think not. He's of the bovine rather than the feline family. Besides, he's under arrest, remember. Therefore he's really your responsibility."

McCord looked as easy-going and good natured as ever. "I'll take him out—in my own way."

"Good God!—you mounted policemen! The attitude they indoctrinate into you before starting you out! You really believe you can dominate the whole, elemental savagery of the North. A handful of you! Why, this country will be here, unchanged like it is, when your kind are wiped off the face of the earth. Your civilization!" He spat at the fire as though the word made an unpleasant taste he had to scrape off his tongue. "You and your jails, your statutes and your hang-ropes. Laws and regulations. You think that is stronger than the thing Ruck represents? You're a fool, McCord, and you come here representing an organiza-

tion of fools. A whole society of fools! A society that continually degenerates because it favors the weak against the strong."

"You'd favor the strong against the weak?"

"Of course. Why is the Wolverine more clever than any animal in the forest? Because he is clever or he dies on his first trip from the den. There's no mercy here. There's only the law of the wild, the survival of the fittest. You should be smart enough to see it. What's the inevitable for a civilization dedicated to the benefit of big-brained weaklings?"

"I'm not a big-brained weakling."

"Ha!" Villon was triumphant. "You see? And so they have sent you out here to die."

Ruck made a gurgling sound of pleasure at sound of the word "die."

Villon went on, "Yes, they sent you out here to die. But you're only one. Consider the armies of the world—those millions upon millions who are ordered out to die by fat-gutted weaklings who sit behind desks. Die by the means devised by other weaklings. Scientists! And when all the strong ones are gone, who will produce the race of men? The weaklings! The big-brained weaklings without hearts, or lungs or blood in their veins."

"You have little hope for the world," McCord said.

"I think mankind is going home. To the home he started from twenty thousand years ago. Back to the caves. There won't be many who'll survive. A few. Those who still have hearts, and lungs, and blood in their veins."

"Like Ruck."

Villon showed his strong teeth and stared at McCord with his milky eyeballs. "Like Ruck."

Villon strode to another room and came back in a moment carrying a cloth-bound book with ratty covers. He thumbed through its pages, holding them flat to the fire in an attempt to see.

"You ever read him?" he asked, thrusting the book at McCord.

Only the author's name remained legible on the cover. Rousseau. He opened it. It was the *Reveries du promeneur solitaire,* printed in the original French.

"You've read Rousseau?" asked Villon.

"A little."

Villon snorted. "Who but a fool would stop reading Rousseau after reading only a little? But you are a policeman. A bloodhound trained to run on the leash."

"You said that before."

VILLON leafed into the book, pausing at a certain place as though it were familiar to his touch. He commenced speaking rapidly, in French, reciting from memory. It was something about the magnificent savage; about man's civilization suddenly breaking, like a fever crossed its apex; about its rapid disintegration and return to the original state. "The caves," as Villon had expressed it. McCord had read enough of Rousseau to know what his ideas were.

When Villon was finished, McCord grinned in his good-natured way and jerked his head to indicate Ruck. "Does he discuss philosophy with you?"

"Your point is not well taken. Rousseau knew there would be few of his own kind in man's ultimate state. And I suppose there'll be few of mine."

"Only Ruck's?"

"I believe Ruck's sort will be tempered somewhat here."

It was a strange way to put it. Adding the word "here" as he had. Evidently he expected Ruck's descendents to live on at this valley. Memory of the girl came to McCord. Villon was a madman—an intelligent, misanthropic madman. No doubt he had an idea of founding at this remote valley a race that would be strong enough to survive and perpetuate itself after the disintegration he believed to be imminent. Ruck and the girl!

Villon seemed to be studying him. It was hard to tell by his milky eyes. "How did you find your way here?"

McCord had no intention of telling the part the girl had played.

"I have a nose for smoke," he said.

"My one concession to civilization, and it betrays me!" He poked the fire with a moccasined toe. The moccasin was hand-rubbed like the girl's. "I was younger when I first came. Sometimes I would go for half the winter without heat."

Villon questioned McCord for the

better part of an hour, asking about things on the outside, about persons from public life who had left the picture many years before. Finally he finished and walked to the other room. The old, big-bore Winchester stood in a corner where Villon had left it, but Ruck was watching, hunched forward, an arrow notched in his bow.

Ruck spoke in a gutteral tone, "You kill Tiny."

"What are you talking about?"

"Tiny. You kill Tiny. Pretty soon I kill *you.*"

Tiny. McCord decided he was talking about his grizzly. "How about the other one?"

"Meglon. You do not kill Meglon. He lived. Bruce too."

The second bear had been knocked down, but the bullet must have missed a vital spot.

"You trained the bears?"

Ruck slowly smiled. He nodded. He was proud of the animals. For the moment he'd forgotten his hatred to bask in what he took to be admiration.

"Yah. I train 'em. Ever since they were cubs. Everything I say they do. Meglon—I like Meglon. But Bruce does not like me. Bruce I beat with chain." Ruck reached beneath his harsh buckskin coat and drew out a length of light log chain. He swung it, tearing splinters from the pole floor. "With this I beat Bruce. Even the great silvertip bear fears Ruck!"

He stopped abruptly and coiled the chain around his hand, watching the door as Villon reappeared.

Villon was carrying a haunch of caribou meat. He laid it on a small, round chopping block and cut thick slices with his hunting knife.

"Never send a man to his grave on an empty stomach," he smiled.

McCord sat down, crosslegged on the bear skin. The rifle was still far away, and Ruck was watching with unchanged wariness. He drew out his mouth organ.

"Mind if I play?"

He put the mouth organ to his lips and fanned tremulous sound from it with cupped palms, playing "La Belle Rose."

Villon had speared caribou on long, sharpened sticks and propped them to broil and drip fat into the coals. Sitting on the heels of his moccasins he rocked to and fro, humming, his lips moving to the music just as the girl had done back down the canyon.

McCord studied his face as he played. There was a resemblance between them. The same arrogance, the same aristocratic cut of features. Only Villon, now gray, had once been black-haired, and his eyes had been brown rather than blue.

McCord kept playing until the caribou had finished cooking. He put the mouth organ away and took the thick chop Villon handed him. It was brown outside, but still red and cold within. He was hungry, and even without salt the meat tasted good.

Ruck moved forward a trifle, his weight creaking the pole floor.

"Hungry?" Villon asked.

Ruck nodded, his eyes on the meat. "Yah. I'm hungry!"

Villon flung a chunk of meat toward him. It struck the floor, and rolled to Ruck's feet. It was like one might feed a husky. The big man pounced on it and tore red flesh from the bone in huge, ravenous mouthfuls.

Villon said, "A tidbit. He'd eat this whole haunch if I gave it to him."

"You feed him?"

"He hunts for himself."

"And for you?"

"There is—someone else."

McCord knew the man was peering at him, but he did not pretend to notice. He ate the caribou meat. Over by the door Ruck was cracking bones with his teeth and sucking out the marrow.

Villon said, "You say your companion was killed by Ruck?"

"Yes."

"And you want to hang him for it. You realize, don't you, that this wilderness never made him what he is? It was your *civilization.* You know about Ruck? He was roustabout in a timber camp down in Manitoba. A big, willing fellow, I'll wager, and as harmless as a Clydesdale horse if he'd been treated the way a man should be treated. But they made a buffoon of him—the butt of every joke. Finally they goaded him too far. He killed a couple of men—with his hands. Broke their backs, he told me. After that he took to the woods, and I guess he

finished off a mounted policeman that came trailing him. He wandered here to the valley. It was a year afterward, and he'd been living like a beast in the woods, capturing game with his bare hands, tearing meat off the carcass with his teeth. He interested me, so I let him stay. Others have come here, stumbled on the place by accident."

"What happened to them?"

"Self preservation. I couldn't let them stay."

"And you couldn't let them go, either."

"Unfortunately, no."

"And why are you letting me live?"

"Only for a while. You see, even *I* enjoy talking to someone from the outside. I haven't been able *quite* to close the door on civilization."

V

RUCK stopped cracking bones. He was hunched forward, listening. Someone must have entered a hidden door to the cabin, for there was a cold draught fanning the floor.

"Nella!" Villon called.

That was the name Ruck had mentioned, too.

McCord asked, "A *girl?* Here?"

"You find that remarkable? Women have always survived this life as well as men. Nella—my brother's daughter. She was left in my care once, long ago. I brought her here when she was too small to remember much. A moment ago you were laughing about the wisdom of Rousseau—his theory of the magnificent savage. I would like to have you see Nella. She may make you change your mind." He called her name then, "Nella!"

A whisper of moccasins answered. She drew up suddenly in the door, staring at McCord.

"You!" she whispered. "You told me you would—"

She stopped, feeling Villon's gaze. A flush had mounted in his neck. Veins of anger grew along forehead and temples. He clasped and unclasped his hands.

"You lied to me!" he hissed.

She backed away, watching his face. She didn't notice the wall until it rammed her shoulders.

He took a step forward, "You lied. You said you'd seen nobody. You said Ruck was wrong about there being another man in the valley!" He waited, and when still she did not answer, his voice rose with a new edge, "You were with him!" He screamed, *"You were with him!"*

"Yes!"

No explanation. Simply defiance.

He went on, "You'd have let him go knowing he'd come back with enough of his mad-dog pack to drag us all off, chained like beasts, and throw us into cages at Edmonton."

"Leave her alone," McCord said. "She escaped and deliberately led me here to your deadfall. What more do you expect?"

Nella looked at McCord, and back at her uncle. The soft bosom of her buckskin dress rose and fell with her rapid breathing, her nostrils were flared, and one strong, rounded hand rested on the bone handle of her hunting knife.

She spoke, a low voice, scarcely audible —"I didn't lead him here. I didn't want to lead him here. I saw a dead man hanging in a tree. A man *he* killed." She jerked her head at Ruck. "I saw him kill the one man. I stood on the rock and saw him shoot the arrow."

"You'd rather sacrifice us all?"

"Yes."

A hard laugh jerked Villon's shoulders. A bitter, metallic sound. His eyes shifted and fastened on Ruck who had now pulled himself to his feet.

"Well, Ruck! Is this what you've been waiting for? For a mountie to come and take her away from you? There she is? Or are you too great a coward?"

Ruck's jaw was hanging open and his eyes were doglike from longing. They never left the girl.

He took one slow, sliding step. The bow slipped from his hand, and he didn't notice.

The girl jerked around to face him. She had drawn the knife. It was held point forward, cutting edge up. The blade was tarnished and dull save along its new-honed edge where firelight gleamed bright as from a silver wire.

Ruck had stopped half the room's width away. It angered Villon still more, "Damn you, I told you she was yours. Take her. Or don't you want a woman for your

own? Would you rather take a she-bear to your den?"

His voice goaded Ruck forward. He took another step, and one more. The girl could have escaped along the wall, but she had no thought of running.

Villon screamed, "Take her!"

The command broke the thread of Ruck's hesitation. With quickness unexpected from one of his gargantuan proportions, he sprang, left hand reaching far out to parry the knife.

He'd expected the blade to lash up and forward, and the hand was ready to strike her wrist. Instead she spun to one side. His arm fanned air. The knife darted, aimed for his chest.

The uncured skin of Ruck's caribou jacket served like a layer of armor, turning the knife blade while his hand closed on her wrist.

She twisted with a sudden strength that almost freed her. He flung her back. Her head bent and she sank teeth into his wrist. Ruck merely held tight, anchored on massive legs, looking down on her with a face giving no hint of pain.

With a slow movement he reached his free hand and closed fingers in her hair. He lifted, jerking his left hand back and forth to tear it from her teeth.

Villon was watching. Anger had drained from his face, leaving it grayish and drawn. He started forward as though to stop them. For the moment he'd forgotten McCord. The Winchester was there—by the wall.

It was three long strides away. Villon spun, trying to head him off. McCord flung himself lengthwise across the floor. His reaching hand closed on the rifle. He rolled and came to a crouch.

Villon grabbed a club from the woodheap. He was above McCord, the club lifted high. McCord batted it aside with the heavy octagonal barrel of the rifle.

The club spun free. Villon sprang, trying to clinch. McCord drove a right hook. The blow smashed Villon to the wall, he struck, rebounded, pitched face forward across the pole floor.

He lay stunned, but Ruck had broken free, flinging the girl. She fell with a force that rolled her over and over. The bow lay on the floor. Ruck seized it.

McCord swung the gun on him. No way of telling whether there was a load in the barrel. It was reflex for him to whip the lever down and back.

A CARTRIDGE flipped up, striking him in the face. There was a vacant feel about the loading mechanism as he closed it. He knew then that there had been only the single cartridge in the gun and now it was empty. He pulled the trigger anyway. The hammer fell with a futile click.

Nella was pushing herself up from the floor.

Her voice cut the room in high-pitched terror. Ruck bent the bow, driving an arrow.

McCord was in movement, pitching face foremost to the floor. He was close to the wall. The arrow thudded and seemed to jerk him backward.

It had sunk its heavy copper head, nailing down a piece of his parka. Once before an arrow had come that close.

He ripped free as Ruck drew a second arrow from the quiver. They were close, so close he was briefly aware of the man's bear-den odor.

McCord sprang from a crouch, driving shoulders against Ruck's legs.

Ruck tried to set himself at the final second, but McCord had the weight and momentum to carry him back. Ruck's heel caught in the floor and he fell, dropping bow and arrow.

Ruck was sitting with hands flung behind him. McCord rocked back, trying to regain his feet. Ruck's legs swung, closing with a scissors hold.

Impossible to escape backward. McCord was half way up. He sensed that Ruck was about to double his legs to draw him forward, so he dropped, doubling his knees, driving them to Ruck's abdomen.

It was a brutal blow, but Ruck took it scarcely wincing. The strength of the man was not human. It was the strength of a great bear.

Ruck had flung his arms out trying to grapple. It was what McCord most wanted to avoid. He'd have no chance against the man's massive strength. He fought backward to his feet. The stick of firewood was nearby. McCord seized it and swung as Ruck was coming forward. It glanced

from his skull, spun from McCord's fingers.

The blow scarcely made him hesitate. He charged, with McCord trying to pivot from his way. The heavy, whipsawed table was there to stop him. He tossed up an arm to catch Ruck's swinging fist. The blow smashed through, driving McCord to the wall.

The wall, more than Ruck's fist, had stunned him. He was still up with the room spinning past glazed eyeballs. There was no memory of striking the floor.

He was there, with the pole floor under his hands and no will to rise. Lethargy was like liquid lead in his muscles. Things were happening in the room, he was not certain just what. Voices kept babbling disjointed groups of words. . .

Someone was lifting him. Maybe a minute, maybe an hour passed. "Walk!" Villon's voice was saying. "You hear me?—walk!"

He tried, but the floor seemed to tilt and make him go in circles. Winter night struck his face. He was aware of walking with the snow sinking under his feet. Then he was inside on a stone floor with dry spruce needles to lie down on.

"Villon!" he called.

There was no answer. It was dark and he was alone. He lay face down and unconsciousness rolled over him.

NELLA could remember the day when Ruck first came to the valley six summers before.

He'd been big then, but thinner, half starved. Like a great, skulking animal, and days passed before Villon could make him talk. At that time Ruck slept on the bear skin before the fireplace and was doglike in his obedience to everything Villon said. But as months and years passed he grew larger and more surly, spending more and more time with the grizzly cubs he caught and trained and kept chained in caves up the mountain. He became like them in habits, even in appearance, and he developed a language of grunts and snarls that fascinated Villon who spent hours and days perfecting it. Yet, beast that Ruck was, Nella had always understood that some day she would be his woman.

Once, two summers before, Ruck in his pawing way had tried to embrace her. Villon had been standing in the cabin door, smiling a little as he watched. Nella knew he'd done something to encourage the massive brute. Her response had been instantaneous. She'd whipped the knife from its sheath and slashed, laying open the flesh of Ruck's forearm from elbow to wrist.

Villon had made no move. He watched as Ruck backed away, clutching his forearm while blood dribbled in little streams from the ends of his blunt fingers.

He said, "If you want her, you'll have to take her. Without my help!"

Ruck had kept his distance fearing the girl's savage temper—until tonight. In the battle that followed, Nella thought for a while that McCord might win, but Ruck soon demonstrated himself be too powerful, too insensible to punishment. He charged with the blind fury of one of his own grizzlies, slammed McCord against the wall, seized him on the rebound, lifted him high, and flung him, trying to smash his skull on the pole floor.

McCord had twisted over in midair, landing on head and shoulder. He was lying on the floor, making no move, as Ruck fitted an arrow in his bow to kill him.

Nella leaped between them.

Ruck swung the bow and arrow, trying to drive her out of his way.

"Ruck!" Villon cried.

Ruck made no sign of hearing.

The Winchester was within reach, but its lone cartridge had been pressed between the poles underfoot and Villon's milky eyes could not locate it. He picked up the empty rifle and rammed its barrel to Ruck's ribs.

Villon was old, but he was still rangy and powerful. His strength made Ruck stagger for balance.

"Drop the bow!" Villon barked.

Ruck blinked at the gun. "No." He spoke as though his tongue were too large for his mouth, shaking his massive head with a violence that swung his tangled, grease-heavy hair. "No! Me, Ruck, kill mounted policeman."

He knew the gun was empty.

Villon said, "You fool! Do *you* want to kill him after he killed Tiny? Wasn't Tiny the cub of Meglon? Don't you think it should be Meglon to kill him?"

Such a thought had not occurred to Ruck. He stood, letting the thought eat its way inside his brain. His heavy lips slowly twisted into something like a smile.

"Yah. Meglon. I let Meglon kill mounted policeman."

It was the first time Villon had been forced to reason with Ruck. But with the cartridge—his last cartridge—gone, there was no choice. When it came to the final test, Villon had been unable to see the brute take Nella for his own. It had become a choice between McCord and Ruck—and McCord had won.

Ruck relaxed the bow, slipped the arrow back in his quiver. He kept making sounds in his throat—grunting sounds he'd picked up from the bears and turned into a rudimentary language.

Nella edged around with moccasins making no more sound than the paws of a pine martin. She stopped with one foot resting above the cartridge.

Ruck was really laughing now, shaking his huge shoulders, his lips peeled back revealing his teeth broken from gnawing bones.

"Meglon!" he chortled. "Meglon—he kill policeman." He bulged his muscles and closed his hands with his knuckles making their popping sounds. "Like that—Meglon kill."

He looked down on McCord who was on hands and knees, head almost dragging the floor. It gave Nella her chance to reach for the cartridge. It was wedged too solidly into place.

Villon groped his way to McCord—

"I'll take him."

"Yah," Ruck muttered.

For the time being Ruck was complacent enough. It wouldn't last. Nella could see that. Ruck had challenged Villon's authority and he'd won. Things once changed would never be the same. Ruck was master now, and he knew it.

"Yah," Ruck said. "You take him to lower cave. You bar door good, you hear? Pretty soon Ruck bring old Meglon down."

Villon nodded. His face looked old and his complexion the hue of cold wood ashes.

"I wait here for you," Ruck said.

Villon had McCord under the arms, lifting him. "Walk!" he kept saying in McCord's ear. "Do you hear me?—walk!"

McCORD staggered, nearly carrying the both of them down. Villon managed to steady him and guide him through the door.

Ruck roared, "Ho! I want him to wake up. I want him to wake up and see old Meglon when he come."

Ruck stood outside, watching Villon help McCord up the path. The cave was fifty paces away. It wasn't a cave, really, but a mine working where some wandering prospector had once run a tunnel trying to search down a lead of native-copper ore.

After Villon had reappeared and rammed the props down to hold the heavy log door, Ruck went back inside. Nella was standing in the same spot as before. A knife was in her right hand, and she had something clutched in her left that she tucked beneath her belt as he advanced.

"You Ruck's woman," he muttered. He was smiling, doing his best to be personable, and the effort made him only more repulsive than before. He stopped two or three steps away and swelled his chest, bringing his arms up with doubled biceps that tightened the sleeves of his greasy skin coat.

"Me Ruck! See? Strong. Even great grizzly bear not strong like Ruck. Even old Meglon, strongest bear in forest, he runs and hides in corner when Ruck come." He gestured at the cave where Villon had taken McCord. "Mountie—he weak. Ruck could kill him with one hand. Ruck could crush skull, see?—like that!"

She stood with the knife closed in her hand, watching him. Her eyes were narrow and hard as green ice. Her lips were pulled thin. Her face showed no sign of fear, but excitement was revealed by the rapid rise and fall of her breast beneath its covering of soft buckskin.

Ruck edged forward, left arm extended. "You come with me. You Ruck's woman."

She let him approach. His hand almost touching her. Then her arm moved with the quickness of a lynx's paw. The knife flashed in a sharp arc, its razor-keen edge slicing the flesh of his cheek and neck.

He roared and sprang for her. The girl dropped to one knee, bent low. His arms

swung above, and she was coming up with the knife ready.

But Ruck, once in motion, was quick, too. Almost as quick as the girl. He doubled his right leg, deflecting the knife with the harsh caribou skin of his trousers. He reached, seized her wrist, jerked her up.

He held her there at arm's length while she writhed, trying to free herself. His hand closed down with greater and greater power. He seemed to enjoy abusing her soft flesh.

She didn't cry out. The only sound was her rapid breathing.

Ruck moved forward, crowding her to the wall. He rammed his hip against her abdomen. His face was close to hers.

"You my woman!" he repeated. "Villon always tell me you are my woman whenever I am man enough to take you. *Now* I take you!" He grinned. "Maybe you like to be my woman?"

She tried to twist free, but Ruck only laughed and thrust her harder against the wall. Blood was streaming from the knife slit that ran from his cheek to midway along the side of his neck.

Villon was coming. His steps crunched snow. Ruck watched as he groped through the door.

"See?" he chortled. "See?—now I am man enough to take her."

Villon kept coming, blinking his eyes. The rifle lay on the floor. He picked it up.

"Tell him to let me go!" Nella hissed.

Villon did not answer. His eyes roved the floor, trying to catch the brassy shine of the cartridge case.

One of Nella's hands was free. She reached in her waist, her hand came out closed. Ruck did not know what she was about.

"Villon!" She tossed the cartridge.

He could not see it coming. It struck his chest and rattled to the floor. He bent over, running fingers along the cracks.

Even then it was a moment before Ruck realized she had thrown him the cartridge. Villon came up with it in his hand. He fed it to the magazine.

Ruck let the girl go, stripped the bow from his arm. She seized his arm, but with a violent swing he hurled her half the length of the cabin. Villon was backing away, peering with milky eyes, pumping the rifle's mechanism. He stopped, gun cocked, finger on the trigger. He was swinging the barrel back and forth.

"Stand where you are!"

Ruck stopped. He was crouched, the bow in his left hand, his right hand resting on the quiver. He watched as the gun muzzle moved past him and came to a stop aimed at a point four or five feet to his left.

Obviously Villon could not see him. Ruck fell back one step, another. His right hand came slowly holding an arrow. Nella rose from the floor, saw him, and screamed. Flame and explosion ripped the cabin. The heavy bullet spun Ruck half way around. He caught his balance, shaking off the effects of shock. Bow and arrow were still in his hands.

He bent the bow to its limit and let the arrow drive.

It was short range—scarcely ten steps. Ordinarily he'd have put the arrow through his quarry's heart. The bullet had thrown him off. It struck Villon in the right side, passing completely through his body to sink its sharp, copper head deep in the wall beyond.

Villon staggered, reeled backward. For a moment he was on his feet, propped with shoulders against the wall. Then fell, heels sliding along the floor, his back splintering the arrow shaft.

He was on the floor breathing hard with lips peeled back. Muscles of neck and shoulders writhed like one taken in epilepsy.

Ruck had fitted another arrow. He padded forward, crouched, spreadlegged. He would probably have fired a second time had not the girl flung herself in the way.

He paused and watched with his dead gaze as she bent over the old man, tearing frenziedly at his clothes. The wound was big and ragged, a killing wound for one of Villon's age even though it had not touched a vital spot.

Ruck was wounded himself, the 45-90 slug striking his ribs and glancing, but he didn't seem to notice. He kept watching Villon and the girl.

"Come!" he said after half a minute had passed. "Come. You Ruck's woman."

She was still tearing at Villon's jacket.

Ruck bent, seized her wrist, dragged her off.

"You hear? Come. The old blind one will die. You have heard him say himself —always in the woods the weak die. Ruck strong. You come with me. You Ruck's woman."

VI

McCORD fought his way up through an ocean of unconsciousness. It had seemed that voices were shouting at him in a meaningless, jay-bird babble, but now he was awake surrounded by cave-darkness and silences.

He sat up. The movement sent pain like white-hot wires up his neck to pierce his brain. His ears sang, so he remained still, scarcely breathing, waiting until he was steady again.

He remembered—the fight, Villon leading him up the path, the cave. It had seemed long ago, at least the length of a single night, but he knew it wasn't. He doubted that more than an hour had passed.

He spoke, "Hello!" There was no answer. Only the shut-in echo of his voice from stone walls.

Faint, grayish strips were visible in one direction. That was the front of the cave, night twilight coming between the heavy logs of the door.

He stood, rested for a while with one hand against the cold stone wall. Somewhere in the depths of the tunnel, water was dripping.

There was still considerable pain in his neck and shoulder, but not the paralyzing kind. There seemed to be no bones broken.

He groped. Near the door, massive, axe-squared logs formed the sides and ceiling. It was one of those extension portals put up by miners to keep snow away from the entrance during winter.

It ended against a door of logs.

He placed his shoulder and pushed. No perceptible give to it. He fumbled through his pockets, drew a match from a water-tight can. By matchflame he examined the door. The logs were a foot through, squared, fit tightly and no doubt held by concealed pegs. Powdery snow had sifted from above, but the opening there was only a crack, scarcely large enough to allow the passage of a chipmunk.

He struck a second match and explored more deeply into the tunnel. It terminated in a cave-in.

McCord again tried his strength on the door. He worked doggedly, trying to spring the topmost log. At least the work was driving pain from his muscles.

He sat down finally to rest. Sweat ran from beneath his parka hood. By habit he felt for his mouth organ, then chuckled at himself, and put it away. He got to wondering about Villon. He was trying to save his life, so the man was not the barbarian he'd tried to make himself. Lots of men soften up on nearing the end of the trail.

Through a crack of the door he could feel air from outside. He filled his lungs of it. He could hear the little, hissing sound that wind currents make in passing through the vast mountainside with its uncounted millions of spruce needles.

And there was something else, a repeated crunching noise—somebody making slow progress through snow. The sound stopped. He listened as seconds dragged past. A thump sounded—wood against wood—and the door trembled.

"Mountie!"

It was Villon. Speaking seemed to take a lot of effort.

"Yes?"

"Pull in. On the door. This prop-hole . . . Wedged."

There were no hinges. The door was merely a flat segment propped into place. McCord worked fingers along the top until there was a place to take hold, and then heaved back with repeated contractions of his shoulder muscles.

The logs made a couple of thumping sounds as they moved. But only a little. No more than half an inch. Just the distance his own efforts had forced them out.

Villon was working, wheezing through nostrils.

"More!" Villon kept whispering.

After what seemed like many minutes, the door groaned and moved. It tilted, veering on one corner, and fell to the snow, setting a billow of cold night air rolling.

"Villon!"

He thought for a moment the door had fallen on him. Then he saw the old man

down on his side and half buried in snow. McCord got him up in his arms. He was lighter than one would expect. There was a heap of spruce needles along one side. McCord laid him there. A glow of twilight found its way inside revealing the sharp outlines of the old man's face.

After a while Villon's lips moved, "You go. Hear me? Go uphill . . ."

"Yes?"

"She's there. In the upper cave."

"With Ruck?"

"Yes. With Ruck. You go. Get her out of the valley. I was a fool." His elbows were digging the needles as he tried to force himself up. His voice came with unexpected fiereceness. "You hear that? I was a fool!"

"Take it easy!"

"Ha! Take it easy. I'm dying."

The buckskin along Villon's right side was heavy with blood. He'd lost lots of it. His efforts had opened the wound wider than ever. It would have hurt him a lot, except that when men get so weak things stop bothering them. McCord laid buckskin over it and was trying to bind it tight.

"Let me alone!" Villon hissed, the words coming at the long end of an exhalation. "I'm . . . finished. Get her."

Something seemed to be strangling the old man. McCord started to loosen his collar. It already exposed part of his chest. His milky eyes seemed to be focussed on something straight above. Hard to tell by the dim light. He noticed then that Villon's breathing had stopped. He'd died that easily. Strange how men would sometimes hang to the final spark of life like fire hangs in wool, while others went out like a blown candle flame.

"Back to the caves!" McCord whispered to himself, looking down on the man's sharp face.

HE STARTED for the door, and then returned. There was a knife at Villon's belt. Nella's razor-keen blade. He took it, went outside. Little enough to fight with—the knife. The cabin wasn't far below, its door open, outlined by the reddish glow of firelight.

He ran down the path. The Winchester lay on the cabin floor. He levered it. Empty. Evidently there had been only the single cartridge left. He wondered how many years Villon had hoarded it. He saw the brass case and picked it up. A faint odor of burnt powder still in it.

He threw the gun aside. No sign of Villon's knife. He didn't delay longer. Outside, a path was broken to the woodpile. He jerked an axe free from the chopblock. It was a Hudson's Bay trapper's head fitted with a home-made birch handle. Balanced nicely, rubbed smooth.

He climbed, carrying the axe. It was easy enough to follow Ruck's trail. Only a single set of tracks. He must have been carrying the girl.

The tracks made a circle of the lower tunnel and took switchbacks through timber. There was a little, hillside clearing. He saw a snowcovered mining dump with the remains of a log tipple at its apex. Fresh tracks had packed the snow to the portal. A scarcely-discernible glow came from inside.

No movement, but McCord did not immediately walk into view. It would be like Ruck to make an ambush. Big and slow-thinking he was by some standards, but animal-clever too. A man must never make the mistake of underestimating a man like Ruck.

McCord waded uphill and through hip-deep snow, finally sliding down to approach the portal from the other side. He looked in.

The light, a reflected glow, came from somewhere in the remote depths. Air flowed past him, so he knew there was a second entrance—at least an air shaft. The air had a musty, stable odor. Water ran in a gutter at one side, making a little hole where it disappeared under the snow.

He walked rapidly down the tunnel. There was a turn, a log door. A couple of heavy prop-poles stood at one side, but the door was slightly open.

The tunnel became wider and higher beyond the door. Evidently an old ore stope. There was a grease-dip giving reddish light that was quickly soaked up by the stone walls. He could see shadow-movements in the cave's deeper recesses. Shaggy and big. A jingle of chain links. And Ruck's voice. No words—just the grunting sounds.

McCord moved through the door. He

did it casually. The axe swung easily in his right hand. He stood among deep shadows that lay along that part of the wall, taking his time to look around.

He couldn't tell how long the stope was. Great quantities of pine and spruce needles had once been dragged in, and now they were trodden into a pulpy mass, damp and musty.

One of the bears snarled. He'd started forward, and McCord could see him in the grease-dip light. A huge, shaggy brute, collared, with a few links of log chain jingling.

He'd caught scent of McCord, though his little, near-sighted eyes had not yet located him. McCord stood where he was. Ruck backed into view, a four-foot length of log chain swinging in one hand.

"Bruce!" he roared.

The animal hesitated, and reared on hind legs. He opened his mouth, peeling back to show fangs. He snarled.

Ruck assumed exactly the same attitude. He bent his massive legs and lifted hands in imitation of the bear. He opened his mouth, pulling back his lips to show his teeth, snarled. When Bruce roared, Ruck also roared. There was something abysmal about Ruck, something that made him seem more of a beast than the bear.

Ruck was deliberately infuriating the animal. After a couple of false, pawing starts, Bruce lunged, smashing out with a right forepaw. Ruck weaved beyond reach. Not far—just enough. Then he came around, swinging the log chain.

The chain struck Bruce across the throat and chest, lifting bits of tufted fur that drifted through the light like cottonwood down.

The bear lunged on, swinging his other paw, and Ruck drove his chain to the animal's open mouth.

The weight of the chain was equal to a sledge. It sent the brute back. He was still reared, lashing with both paws, but he'd lost the will to charge. He dropped to all fours and rammed over with one side against the wall as Ruck strode on, laughing in a hoarse-triumphant voice, smashing the chain repeatedly against the stone wall just above Bruce's back.

McCord had meanwhile been edging further inside. His eyes caught movement against the other wall. The girl. She was in full sight, lying on a heap of fresh needles, wrists and ankles tied with lengths of babiche thong. There was no gag in her mouth, and McCord knew she'd been watching him all the time, silent for fear of alarming Ruck.

McCord reached her, crouched on one knee, knife in his hand. Ruck had turned and was looking directly at them. McCord froze his movements, letting the shadow hide him. Ruck turned away. A second bear shook collar links and snarled. Light struck his side showing the caked fur where he'd been wounded. That had been McCord's bullet during their fight down the valley.

"Meglon!" Ruck muttered.

THE animal stopped. His head was down, swinging to and fro. A rumble came from his throat. His teeth looked yellowish and a dribble of foam shone in the light.

McCord worked, cutting the thongs. They were moose babiche, dry and hard, like cutting steel wire. It took time. . .

Meglon kept trying to move past. Ruck suddenly realized they had scented something. He spun around.

The girl's ankles were free, but wrappings of babiche still held her wrists. McCord sprang back, jerking her to her feet.

Ruck was coming forward. He'd left his bow someplace. His only weapon was the chain. The axe was in McCord's hand and he saw it. He stopped, hunched and hulking, hair hanging over his blunt face like tangled vines and his little, cruel eyes glistening through.

"Meglon!" he said hoarsely, swinging the chain hand, signaling for the bear to go forward. Meglon stayed where he was. It enraged Ruck. He moved aside, voice rising to a scream.

Meglon lumbered out, slowly at first, and then with gathering speed as though it were not easy to get the ponderous muscles of his body to moving.

Ruck followed, lashing him on with the chain.

Nella was through the door, and McCord could have made it too, but no human strength could have closed and held it against the animal's charge. He knew something of a grizzly's ways. Meglon would rise on hind legs at the final mo-

ment. So McCord stopped by the door and waited.

Meglon reared. He looked twice his former size then, head almost touching the ceiling. McCord sprang back, through the door. He rammed it shut. Nella was trying to lift the prop-pole with babiche-tied hands.

McCord helped heave it over—a log, eight or ten inches thick. He flung his weight, driving it into place.

Meglon struck the door, making it weave, but the pole held solid. He placed the second one and rammed it down.

Dark, now, with light from the grease-dip shut off. He knew the girl was standing close beside him.

"There's another entrance?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Two of them. One uphill. Another around the mountain."

"How long will it take him?"

"As long as it brings snow-water to boil."

He could feel the soft warmth of her shoulder against him. She was twisting her hands, trying to free them from the babiche. He felt for the thong, cut it. Then he handed her the knife.

"Yours."

"Where's Villon?"

"Dead."

She made no sound. He wondered if she cared anything for him; wondered if she was capable of really caring for anybody.

She was close to him, leaning a little. He knew she was looking up at him through the darkness. There was danger beyond the door and no time to waste with Ruck hunting out his escape route around the mountain, but McCord hesitated, drawn by the nearness of her.

He placed hands on her waist. He hadn't realized before how slim she was. His hands almost went around her. He expected her to twist away with the old catlike fury. She didn't. She remained still, waiting.

She had moved closer so he could feel the caress of her breath striking his throat. He drew her hard against him, and she came with a sinuous, eager movement.

The watch in his pocket was ticking time away. Already Ruck had called his bears from the door. There was little enough time . . .

He kissed her. No response from her lips, but her body was pliant with willingness.

"We have to go," he said.

"Yes!" She whispered the word and pressed more strongly against him. "Yes!"

He pushed her away, then, still holding her wrist, he led her, running, down the dark tunnel. There was a turn, with the portal visible, framing starlight.

Sound of the bears had diminished to nothing. Winter air struck them. It smelled good after the fetid dampness of the cave.

He started downhill, but the girl seized his arm, swinging him around.

"The bears! He'll run us down with them through the deep snow!"

There was an extra pistol among his supplies at the cache camp, and McCord would have traded his chevrons for it at that moment, but the girl was already climbing zig-zag from one buried rock to another up the mountain.

His first responsibility was to her. To save her first, and take Ruck afterward. He followed, wading deep snow after her.

He climbed with sustained effort and the sharp air exercising a deadening effect on his mind. From the past, something kept ringing through his head. Something his father had said. "There's a time to lead, and a time to follow. It's up to every man to do a little o' both. But look out for a crimson haired woman, me-lad. If she gets to front-runnin' she'll lead ye over the bad-brink o' hell!"

VII

THE WORDS kept running in his mind, over and over, making a rhythm of his effort, the regularity of his breathing. "Look out for a crimson-haired woman . . . She'll lead ye o'er the bad-brink o' hell . . ." His mind made a song of them as the fatigue of hard going settled its drug on his mind.

Up and up—no trail—none visible, anyway—just Nella moving with swift sureness, unpredictably, first one direction and then another, finding ledges of rock where snow was shallow, hunting passages through tangled areas of windfalls.

At last she stopped, turned. They'd been going for half an hour. McCord's lungs were bursting from altitude and exertion.

She walked to the very point of a rock pinnacle and looked down on the valley. Wind was blowing there, whipping the wolverine edging of McCord's parka hood, waving the pointed spruce tips below.

The valley was bluish white with solid masses where the forest grew. The cabin was down there, vaguely visible. No sign of firelight now in its door.

"See anything?" he asked.

"Not yet."

She said it like that—coming down on the *yet*. It was as though she considered it inevitable that Ruck would gain on them.

"We'll have to go faster," she said.

McCord smiled grimly. He wondered how hard a person could go, fighting deep snow, climbing and ever climbing in that wild country of rock and evergreen.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"The Hanging Valley." She pointed in an uncertain direction that indicated something in the higher peaks. "Villon named it that. The Hanging Valley."

"And why there?"

"We can fight him off there. But he'll know. He'll be taking the steep trail, trying to cut us off."

"He won't catch us."

"Ruck will catch us, unless—"

"And after Hanging Valley?"

She stood facing him, looking up with questioning eyes.

He said, "We can't stay there forever."

"I often go there. Villon built a cabin. I have a bow and arrow there. Snares for rabbits. We can stay there."

He still looked at her.

"I am your woman."

She said it simply. Convention, the common standards of civilization—Villon had taught her little of it. She'd chosen him like some wild creature chosing its mate—chose him unthinkingly as she had fought against Ruck. The attraction for man for woman is some thousands of years older than the marriage license bureau. And maybe, like Villon believed, it would last after the last license bureau had disappeared in the ruins of man's civilization.

She was looking up at him. She had grown tense, and her eyes were narrowed.

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"I am your woman!"

"Yes. Of course you're my woman."

It satisfied her. She moved past him on light moccasins. A rock ledge slanted up the mountain. She sprang to it, balancing on toes and one hand. The ledge was exposed here and there and she ran, springing from point to point with a lynx-footed lightness. McCord followed, sometimes losing ground, sometimes gaining. The ledge ended. She dropped to thigh-deep snow, climbed to a windfall invisible to McCord's eyes, and did a tight-rope walk down its springy length.

They climbed as stars grayed with approaching dawn. There was a windswept shoulder with the mountain dropping steeply to a narrowing valley. Little timber now.

Only bare rock with here and there some snow that had been wind-packed to form a crust tough enough to support a man's weight. A game trail showing fresh caribou tracks wound from the higher mountains.

The girl stopped to look back. Her eyes swept the upper slopes.

"Yes!" she whispered.

McCord saw then. Ruck, moving at a trot, and behind him the hulking forms of two bears.

"How the devil did he get that far?"

"No one can climb like Ruck!"

"Where's the valley?"

She gestured toward the rising summits. Mist hung there, partly obscuring them. Hotsprings. They were what accounted for the valley's warmth, its lush vegetation, its huge spruce trees.

The trail followed a steep slope ending in a cliff. Far below they could see the river, flowing black between shores of shelf-ice. Ahead was a waterfall. The mutter of it had been audible for the last mile.

Ruck kept inching ahead. He was no more than a quarter-mile above. Nella unexpectedly left the trail and commenced climbing from toe-hold to toe-hold.

THERE was a higher trail, one leading a considerable distance above the waterfall. She was trying to reach it ahead of Ruck.

A rock dislodged by Ruck struck smooth stone above them and bounded, spinning high overhead to disappear into the abyss.

McCord could see then—there was only that one trail.

She was tiring now. For a long time she'd been light-footed as a doe, while he plodded behind. But in the last few miles his trail-hardened muscles had proved themselves. She kept stumbling. It was useless trying to beat Ruck now.

McCord took her arm. She leaned against him for a moment, off-balance from fatigue. Then she started forward, pulling at him.

"Keep going!" she whispered through set teeth. "Can't you see—"

"I can see it's no good. He's heading us of."

"We can't stop *here*."

It was a bleak, windswept area of rock with the mountain rising precipituously above while at their feet the slope steepened to a thousand feet of perpendicular cliff.

Ruck had stopped. He returned a few steps. Dawn was bright enough so McCord could see his features. The bears were chained one to the other, with a length of babiche thong leading from the chain to Ruck's hand.

"You go on," McCord said. "He can't follow both of us at once."

She turned on him fiercely.

"I said to go on! On to your valley. He'll have to come down here for me. I'll be along—later on."

"You'll die."

McCord removed a mitten and stood with a short hold on the axe, "A man with one of these things can generally look after himself."

She moved away, watching over her shoulder. He'd expected more rebellion. . . .

Wind whipped in from above, carrying the tinkle of iron chain. Ruck had started down the slope, moving cautiously from its steepness. A man who once started to roll might end up in the river a thousand-odd feet below.

After covering half the distance he stopped and unlinked the chain from Meglon's neck. Meglon was tired and surly. He moved away, pointing downhill in response to Ruck's command. After a few yards he stopped with back hunched to the wind.

Ruck cursed and prodded him with the

sharpened end of his bow, and Meglon lumbered down at a sliding lope. McCord turned to face him, but Meglon was not coming that way.

Nella had not gone on toward the trail. She was around the mountain, seventy-five or a hundred yards away. She was almost to the cliff edge. As the bear approached she moved farther. She found a rock pinnacle overhanging the abyss, and waited at the edge of it.

Meglon stopped a dozen steps away and was watching her. Nella snatched up a piece of sharp stone and hurled it.

Meglon saw the missile coming and wheeled over, letting the stone sail above. It clattered and rolled back, almost striking the girl on its return.

It appeared to McCord that she had deliberately tried to infuriate the beast.

Meglon lunged forward, swinging his massive head. He opened his mouth, showing his fangs with dribbles of foam.

"Meglon!" roared Ruck from above.

It was plain he hadn't ordered the bear to attack her—he'd merely wanted to turn her from the cliff trail.

But Meglon was far from the chain now. He ignored his master's command.

Nella watched him intently. She had dropped to a crouch, knife in one hand, a sharp fragment of rock in the other. The pinnacle was rounded, its top narrow, sides falling away into an abyss so deep the shadows of its bottom looked misty-purple. Sometime, long before, a jackpine had found root on the windward side and had grown there in twisted, serpentlike forms with branches large as a person's arm.

"Meglon!" Ruck shouted again.

This time the bear stopped. He stood with forepaws resting on the shoulder of the pinnacle. The girl was trapped there.

Ruck grunted. McCord could hear the satisfaction in his voice blown down on the mountain wind.

Ruck unsnapped the second bear—old Bruce. The bear started watching McCord with surly eyes, cutting him off from the pinnacle, trapping him with his back to the cliff.

There was nothing left for McCord but turn on the animal—and Ruck. Nella

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had taken one of the bears off him. It was what she'd intended to do—to give him a fighting chance.

He found a bit of footing where slide-rock hung, its sharp edges wind-packed with snow. A sort of breastwork jutted up, large enough to give him cover.

He waited, swinging the short, Hudson's bay axe.

Bruce hesitated, eyes on the axe. He'd taken lots of beatings and had learned to fear things like that in a man's hand.

Above, Ruck had stopped. His eyes were no longer on McCord, but on the girl.

She had just hurled a second rock. It was close range, and the jagged fragment took Meglon aside the head.

Meglon was a fierce brute, massive even as grizzlies go, large as a young bull. The rock stung and enraged him. He charged, and the girl was waiting.

SHE was still crouched, knife in her hand, edge up, almost touching the cold, smooth rock of the pinnacle. Her teeth could be seen between tight-drawn lips—a tiny smile.

The bear was almost atop of her, and she hadn't moved. At the final moment he reared. She came forward and the blade made a glitter in the morning light.

Meglon roared at the blade's sharp sting. He was lashing blindly with both paws, but Nella had bounded to the extreme, far point of the pinnacle.

Meglon followed in a blind charge. The girl spun to one side, resting on the balls of her feet.

She was hidden by the bear's huge side. He tried to turn, balanced for a moment with four feet almost together. The rock apex was too narrow. He slipped, fell to his side. For two or three seconds he was clawing for support, and then he disappeared—a vague shadow plunging into the abyss.

The crag was empty of life. No sign of the girl. No sound, except for the hiss of winter wind as it whipped down the bare mountain.

Then Ruck turned on McCord.

A roar mounted in his throat. Not sorrow, but rage at the trick of luck that had taken both Meglon and the girl from him.

McCord was in the open, clambering toward the pinnacle. Bruce was still there, blocking the way.

Ruck let drive an arrow, but McCord went face foremost, making it miss. He came up from hands and knees, springing to the rock's protection.

Ruck came on, notching a second arrow. Footing was bad. He tried to set himself, fired as he fell. Arrow wild. He drove a third as he was crouched with one leg doubled under him, sliding downhill. It splintered itself on stone by McCord's cheek.

Bruce was there, blocking the way. Ruck grabbed the coarse hair of his hindquarters, pulling himself upright. He tried to get clear, but the animal rammed him. Ruck was fitting another arrow. He had only that one and another left.

He put the arrow back, drew the chain, and commenced trying to beat Bruce forward to the attack. Instead the grizzly turned on him.

There was something about the bear at that moment—something that brought another picture to McCord's mind. He recalled what Villon had said about Ruck—about how those timber-jacks had driven him just so far, and then something had snapped and the man turned on them. Thus with Bruce.

Bruce rose, taking the chain across his open mouth. Blood mixed with saliva and strung from between his fangs, but this time it was Ruck and not the bear who retreated.

Bruce charged. One outflung, swinging paw tangled the chain. It was jerked from Ruck's grasp—clanked and came to repose on the steep rock.

For a second Ruck was standing, facing the bear unarmed. He fell, half sitting as Bruce charged. With a movement of automatic swiftness the bow was off his shoulder, an arrow notched.

He fired. The heavy, copper head struck Bruce's unprotected breast. Its force deflected the direction of his lunge. Bruce went down, twisted aside, rolled over and over, snarling, tearing at breast with claws in a death-agony.

Ruck rose. He drew and notched his last arrow.

"Ho! You can't fight Ruck. No man can fight Ruck. See?—even great silver-tip bear cannot fight Ruck."

McCORD looked at him and laughed with contempt unmistakeable in his bitter tone.

The girl was gone, disappeared into the vast emptiness. No one could fall into those depths and live. For a moment of shock, he'd forgotten about Ruck and Bruce. He'd started away along the steep slope, contemptuous of his own safety, but when Ruck fired the arrow he'd gone headlong to save himself.

The futile emptiness had left him then, replaced by hatred for this brute-man who was responsible for it all.

So McCord flung the challenge back at him, baring his teeth, stepping clear of the rock, the axe in his hand.

"Coward with your bow!" he shouted in a voice that cut like a frozen dog-lash.

Ruck had the arrow partly drawn. He paused. It seemed to take him a moment to recognize the meaning of McCord's words. His heavy face became a contorted picture of fury when that word "coward" went home. He rammed the arrow back so violently its knife-edge head was half driven through the bottom of the quiver.

He lumbered forward, dropping the bow, letting it skid down the steep rock ahead of him. The chain swung heavily in his right hand.

McCord went uphill to meet him. He waited, tall with lean, whiplash quickness to match the brute power of Ruck.

Ruck came to a sliding stop, the chain whistling in an arc over his head. He swung it up and around. It weighed twenty-five or thirty pounds. A single blow would have killed had it landed.

McCord spun and stepped back, finding an instant footing in loose slide-rock. The chain roared past him, clanged the rock at his feet.

He'd been ready for the chain. It had come just as he'd expected. He'd even planned for the moment Ruck would be carried forward, staggering for balance.

The Hudson's Bay axe was still swinging loose in his right hand. He came around, swinging it underhand for Ruck's heart.

But Ruck had sensed the movement. He could not stop his forward momentum, but he could acellerate it. He dove forward. His weight struck McCord, and the two

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of them reeled downhill across crumbling footing.

The axe had struck—McCord didn't know where. It's head twisted over almost spinning the handle from his grasp.

Ruck was trying to clinch. He knew the danger of that. He was no match for the man in a simple contest of strength.

He spun and went to his side, struck the slanting rock, twisted over. Snow had gathered in a drift wind-packed along the edge of the cliff. It saved him. He came to hands and knees. He still had the axe. He could see torn buckskin along Ruck's thigh and blood where its keen edge had struck. His side and the neck of his jacket were blackened and heavy with blood, too. Older wounds—the 45-90 slug and the knife wound he'd taken the night before.

RUCK wheeled around. He was poised above, one moccasin driven deep in the snow, the other on slanting rock. He drove down with the chain as McCord was rising.

McCord lifted the axe, and the chain wrapped around it. Its end links scorched his face, tearing skin. Ruck reared back and ripped the axe from McCord's fingers. It unwound from the chain, struck rock and bounded, disappearing into the abyss.

Ruck uttered a roar of triumph. His antagonist was before him, unarmed. He charged, swung the chain high, drove it with the strength of both arms.

McCord had no choice. His only chance was to grapple. He lunged head foremost, striking Ruck's waist with his shoulder.

The chain clanged against stone. The force of its missing tore it from Ruck's fingers. For the moment the big man was backpeddling. Then Ruck stopped himself, wrapping McCord in his gorilla arms.

McCord was aware of the warmth of his body, the stick bear-den odor of him —and chiefly he was aware of the man's inhuman strength.

His strength was on the order of the great bears he had made captive. He drew in, wringing the air from McCord's lungs. He applied more pressure, more. McCord tried to twist, to drive his knee to the man's groin. There wasn't room. He had one free arm. He doubled his fist and drove it repeatedly to the man's kidney with no effect. Ruck's face was pressed close, his bone-broken teeth clenched in a savage smile.

"Ruck kill!" he was hissing. "Ruck kill with hands. Ruck break back."

He would do it—just as he'd broken those timber jacks years ago at Quill Lake. He'd close his hands in the middle of McCord's back; he'd draw in, and in—then, at the proper moment, he'd swell his chest and give that final twist that would leave McCord writhing and helpless.

McCord felt himself bent further and further. His lungs were bursting from lack of air—eyes covered with red blindness. The steep bank was behind him. He was bent so far his free arm dangled and touched stone.

He remembered the bow with its sharpened, prod-pole end. It was somewhere close. He felt for it—touched it.

He'd intended to use the sharpened end for a spear, but it was too blunt. No chance anyway, off balance, with Ruck pressed close.

He could feel Ruck's clamped hands twisting, seeking a certain point along his spine. The huge man panted in his ear, bending him to the breaking point.

McCord rammed down on the bow. He bent it, bent it further. He could hear the creak of its fitted pieces of horn and wrapped babiche. He want it to snap. He wanted Ruck to hear the snap. But it was strong. He gathered his strength for a final effort.

With a sharp *crack!* the bow broke beneath him. Lack of its support made both men stagger.

Ruck roared his triumph, mistaking its sound for a broken spine.

McCord made himself go limp, dropping with all his weight over collapsing knees. He slid free as Ruck's grip loosened, and struck the hard mountainside on his back.

He was still almost blind from want of air. His muscles felt hot and tired as though running full of molten metal. He was conscious of Ruck's big form hulking over him. It was practically reflex for his legs to double and uncoil.

There was scarcely any sensation of the blow landing, but Ruck was reeling, fighting to save himself from the edge of the cliff.

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He fell and lay with both feet dug in the snow, outflung hands clutching weather-smoothed rock. McCord filled his lungs, made it to his feet. Blindness had dropped away, strength was flooding back through his muscles.

He saw Ruck get up, still sick from the kick his guts had absorbed. McCord was there, waiting. He set his heels, swung right and left. Ruck tried to fend them off —a feeble movement. They connected, rocking his head, sending greasy hair flying.

Ruck reeled, doing a staggering balance at the cliff's edge.

McCord followed, a wild sense of triumph flooding him. He smashed one to Ruck's unprotected abdomen. It bent him over. His eyes were staring, mouth open like a stricken carp's.

McCord smashed over a perfectly timed right. Ruck's head snapped and he pitched forward on collapsing knees.

He was on hands and belly, weaving his head. His eyes rolled up, staring, agonized with fear. He pushed himself to a sitting position with one leg doubled under him.

"No . . . No . . ." he was muttering thickly.

"Get up!" McCord snarled.

"No."

He got to his feet. Backpeddled. The chain was there—in reach. He fell. On hands and knees, he clutched it. Feel of its cold weight seemed to impart some of the old confidence. He lunged up, swinging the chain in a wide, horizontal movement.

McCord sidestepped, let the chain's weight carry Ruck off balance. He was set, ready. He smashed Ruck. The chain's weight added to the man's momentum as he reeled. He struck snow along the edge without realizing where he was.

He got to his feet. Backpedalled. The edge crumbling beneath him. The chain was gone. He clutched but there was nothing but falling snow for his fingers. And the next instant he was gone with his voice trailing off into nothing.

McCord walked to the edge. He was weak and dizzy after the sudden ending. He lowered himself to one knee to keep from falling. Far below he could see jagged slide rock, patches of purplish timber, the river, the waterfall.

No sign of Ruck—nor of Nella.

He steadied himself though an emptiness still lay in his stomach. He had no hate left. He felt burnt out.

He stood up. Someone was running, bounding from foothold to foothold along the slope. It was Nella.

"I couldn't help you!" she was saying. "I had a hard time getting back . . ."

He met her, seized her shoulders, drew her close against him. Until that moment, until feeling the warmth of her, he was afraid her appearance was only a trick of his longing.

But she was real, unharmed, unfrightened by anything except his own close scrape with death.

He said, "I thought you'd fallen."

She shook her head. "I knew I could lead Meglon over the edge. I knew the crag. I stood on it a hundred times, looking at the waterfall. There was a tree at one side. A dwarf pine with its roots in a crevice. I hung there and nothing could reach me."

She was saying more. He scarcely heard her. He kept her close as though fearing to let her go for an instant. Her warmth seemed to transmit strength to his body. It's like that with a man and a woman. Each one is stronger because of the other.

It came to him how lonely he'd been. Through all his years of wandering in that vast land of wood, and snow, and tundra.

He held her at arm's length and looked at her. There was an expression of eagerness on her face, of expectation. It would be fine to take her out to civilization, to show her all the things she'd never seen. He tried to imagine her in Edmonton clothes. She'd be beautiful.

"You'll go with me?" he asked. "Outside?"

"Anywhere."

Her hand was in his. She drew him gently along the trail, uphill, toward the deeper wilderness.

He told himself he should turn back, but he didn't. He'd been a long time without rest. Tired. Edmonton was a long way off, but the valley was close. Hanging Valley. He wanted to see it. With her

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